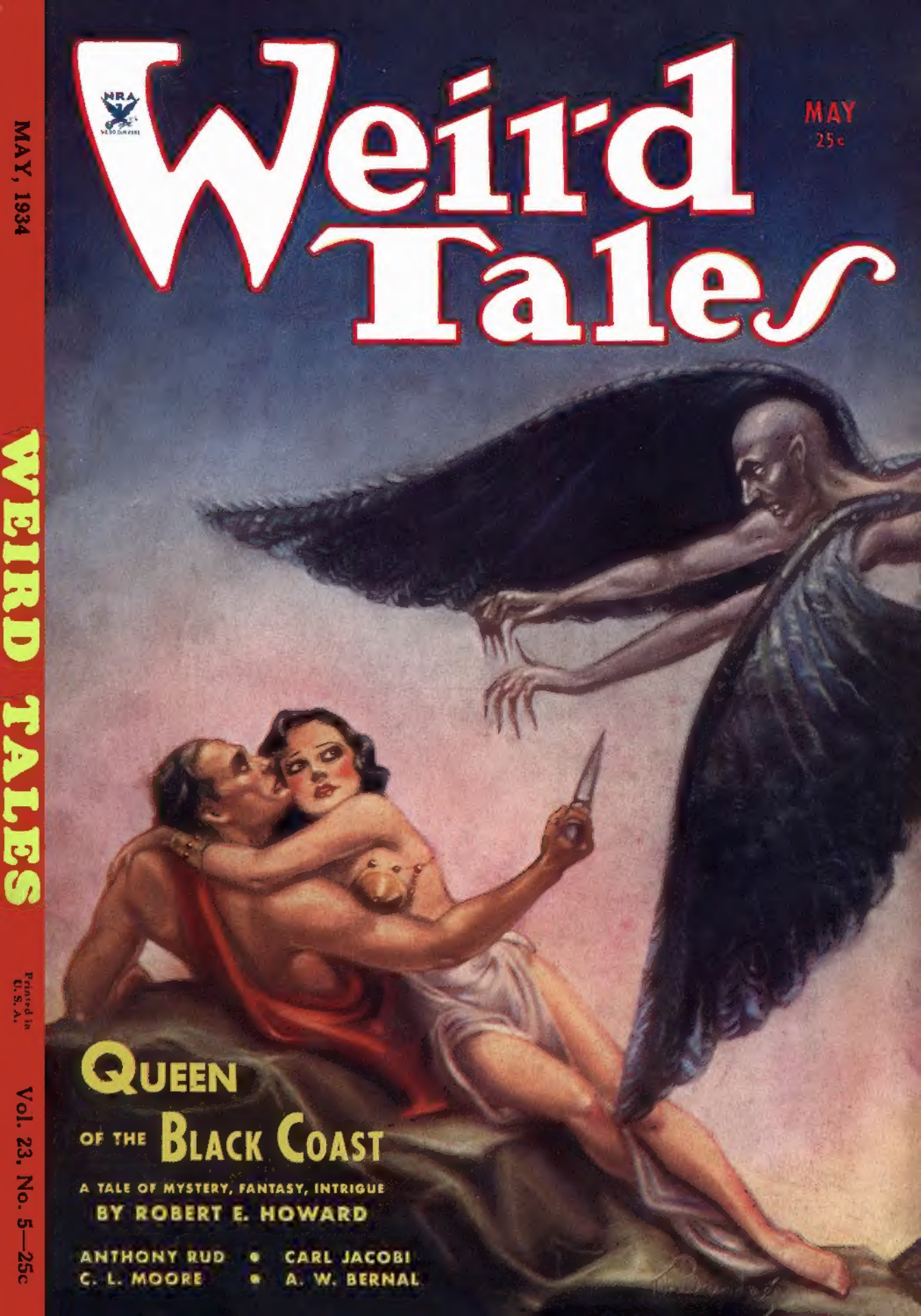
Weird Tales
MAY
25c
QUEEN
OF THE BLACK COAST
A TALE OF MYSTERY, FANTASY, INTRIGUE
BY ROBERT E. HOWARD
ANTHONY RUD • CARL JACOBI
C. L. MOORE • A. W. BERNAL

MAY, 1934
WEIRD TALES
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Vol. 23, No. 5—25c

A Mysterious Message from the Ether!

"To All Mankind:

"I am the dictator of human destiny. Through control of the earth's internal forces I am master of every existing thing. I can blot out all life—destroy the globe itself. It is my intention to abolish all present governments and make myself emperor of the earth.

"Communicate this to the various governments of the earth:

"As a preliminary to the establishment of my sole rule throughout the world, the following demands must be complied with:

"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with, all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

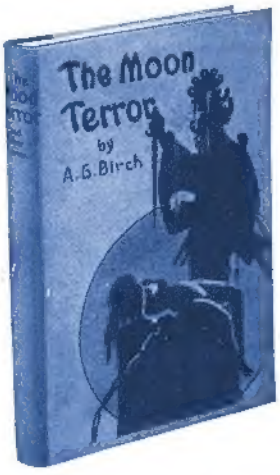
"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

"The alternative is the destruction of the globe.

"KWO"

Who was this mysterious "KWO," and was his message actually a momentous declaration to the human race, or merely a hoax perpetrated by some person with an over-vivid imagination?

Newspapers and scientific journals began to speculate upon the matter, advancing all manner of theories to account for this strange summons. In Europe, as well as in America, vast throngs of excited people filled the streets in front of the newspaper offices, watching the bulletin boards for further developments. *Was this really the beginning of the dissolution of our planet?* Read THE MOON TERROR.



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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Her lithe figure shimmered like ivory beneath the moon."

Queen of the Black Coast

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A weird story of Conan the barbarian, and a savage white woman who captained a pirate ship, and a ghastly horror in the jungle

1. Conan Joins the Pirates

Believe green buds awaken in the spring,
That autumn paints the leaves with somber fire;
Believe I held my heart inviolate
To lavish on one man my hot desire.
—*The Song of Bêlit.*

HOOFS drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet

cloak flowing out on the wind. Far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broad-waisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck.

"Who invited you aboard?"

"Get under way!" roared the intruder with a fierce gesture that spattered red drops from his broadsword.

"But we're bound for the coasts of Cush!" expostulated the master.

"Then I'm for Cush! Push off, I tell you!" The other cast a quick glance up the street, along which a squad of horsemen were galloping; far behind them toiled a group of archers, crossbows on their shoulders.

"Can you pay for your passage?" demanded the master.

"I pay my way with steel!" roared the man in armor, brandishing the great sword that glittered bluely in the sun. "By Crom, man, if you don't get under way, I'll drench this galley in the blood of its crew!"

The shipmaster was a good judge of men. One glance at the dark scarred face of the swordsman, hardened with passion, and he shouted a quick order, thrusting strongly against the piles. The galley wallowed out into clear water, the oars began to clack rhythmically; then a puff of wind filled the shimmering sail, the light ship heeled to the gust, then took her course like a swan, gathering headway as she skimmed along.

● Two very different pictorial conceptions of Conan the barbarian, hero of Robert E. Howard's vivid stories, appear in this issue, one on the opposite page and one on the cover. The increasing popularity of the Conan stories has evoked many requests that Conan be pictured on the cover. Therefore we asked M. Brundage, who does the covers, to pick out a weird and dramatic situation with Conan in it, and telegraphed to Hugh Rankin, who already had the printer's proofs of the story, to base his black and white drawing on some other part of the tale. But Mr. Rankin had already sent his illustration, which pictured part of the same scene chosen by M. Brundage for the cover design. Both conceptions were so striking that we decided to let you look at both of them and see which one you prefer. It is interesting to note how differently these two fine artists have visualized the weird monstrosity encountered by Conan. You will find the story fully equal to the illustrations.

On the wharfs the riders were shaking their swords and shouting threats and commands that the ship put about, and yelling for the bowman to hasten before the craft was out of arbalest range.

"Let them rave," grinned the swordsman hardly. "Do you keep her on her course, master steersman."

The master descended from the small deck between the bows, made his way between the rows of oarsmen, and mounted the mid-deck. The stranger stood there with his back to the mast, eyes narrowed alertly, sword ready. The shipman eyed him steadily, careful not

to make any move toward the long knife in his belt. He saw a tall powerfully built figure in a black scale-mail hauberk, burnished greaves and a blue-steel helmet from which jutted bull's horns highly polished. From the mailed shoulders fell the scarlet cloak, blowing in the sea-wind. A broad shagreen belt with a golden buckle held the scabbard of the broadsword he bore. Under the horned helmet a square-cut black mane contrasted with smoldering blue eyes.

"If we must travel together," said the master, "we may as well be at peace with each other. My name is Tito, licensed master-shipman of the ports of Argos. I am bound for Cush, to trade beads and silks and sugar and brass-hilted swords to the black kings for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls."

The swordsman glanced back at the rapidly receding docks, where the figures still gesticulated helplessly, evidently having trouble in finding a boat swift enough to overhaul the fast-sailing galley.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," he answered. "I came into Argos seeking employment, but with no wars forward, there was nothing to which I might turn my hand."

"Why do the guardsmen pursue you?" asked Tito. "Not that it's any of my business, but I thought perhaps——"

"I've nothing to conceal," replied the Cimmerian. "By Crom, though I've spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

"Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king's guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wroth, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

"But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge's skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable's stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts."

"Well," said Tito hardily, "the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love. I'll have questions to answer if I ever anchor in that port again, but I can prove I acted under compulsion. You may as well put up your sword. We're peaceable sailors, and have nothing against you. Besides, it's as well to have a fighting-man like yourself on board. Come up to the poop-deck and we'll have a tankard of ale."

"Good enough," readily responded the Cimmerian, sheathing his sword.

The *Argus* was a small sturdy ship, typical of those trading-craft which ply between the ports of Zingara and Argos and the southern coasts, hugging the shoreline and seldom venturing far into the open ocean. It was high of stern, with a tall curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was fur-

nished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jibsail. The oars were for use in tacking out of creeks and bays, and during calms. There were ten to the side, five fore and five aft of the small mid-deck. The most precious part of the cargo was lashed under this deck, and under the fore-deck. The men slept on deck or between the rowers' benches, protected, in bad weather, by canopies. With twenty men at the oars, three at the sweep, and the shipmaster, the crew was complete.

So the *Argus* pushed steadily southward, with consistently fair weather. The sun beat down from day to day with fiercer heat, and the canopies were run up—striped silken cloths that matched the shimmering sail and the shining gold-work on the prow and along the gunwales.

They sighted the coast of Shem—long rolling meadowlands with the white crowns of the towers of cities in the distance, and horsemen with blue-black beards and hooked noses, who sat their steeds along the shore and eyed the galley with suspicion. She did not put in; there was scant profit in trade with the sons of Shem.

Nor did master Tito pull into the broad bay where the Styx river emptied its gigantic flood into the ocean, and the massive black castles of Khemi loomed over the blue waters. Ships did not put unasked into this port, where dusky sorcerers wove awful spells in the murk of sacrificial smoke mounting eternally from blood-stained altars where naked women screamed, and where Set, the Old Serpent, arch-demon of the Hyborians but god of the Stygians, was said to writhe his shining coils among his worshippers.

Master Tito gave that dreamy glass-floored bay a wide berth, even when a serpent-prowed gondola shot from behind a castellated point of land, and naked dusky women, with great red blossoms in their hair, stood and called to his sailors, and posed and postured brazenly.

Now no more shining towers rose inland. They had passed the southern borders of Stygia and were cruising along the coasts of Cush. The sea and the ways of the sea were never-ending mysteries to Conan, whose homeland was among the high hills of the northern uplands. The wanderer was no less of interest to the sturdy seamen, few of whom had ever seen one of his race.

They were characteristic Argosean sailors, short and stockily built. Conan towered above them, and no two of them could match his strength. They were hardy and robust, but his was the endurance and vitality of a wolf, his thews steeled and his nerves whetted by the hardness of his life in the world's wastelands. He was quick to laugh, quick and terrible in his wrath. He was a valiant trencherman, and strong drink was a passion and a weakness with him. Naïve as a child in many ways, unfamiliar with the sophistry of civilization, he was naturally intelligent, jealous of his rights, and dangerous as a hungry tiger. Young in years, he was hardened in warfare and wandering, and his sojourns in many lands were evident in his apparel. His horned helmet was such as was worn by the golden-haired Æsir of Nordheim; his hauberk and greaves were of the finest workmanship of Koth; the fine ring-mail which sheathed his arms and legs was of Nemedia; the blade at his girdle was a great Aquilonian broadsword; and his gorgeous scarlet cloak could have been spun nowhere but in Ophir.

So they beat southward, and master Tito began to look for the high-walled villages of the black people. But they found only smoking ruins on the shore

of a bay, littered with naked black bodies. Tito swore.

"I had good trade here, aforetime. This is the work of pirates."

"And if we meet them?" Conan loosened his great blade in its scabbard.

"Mine is no warship. We run, not fight. Yet if it came to a pinch, we have beaten off reavers before, and might do it again; unless it were Bêlit's *Tigress*."

"Who is Bêlit?"

"The wildest she-devil unhanged. Unless I read the signs a-wrong, it was her butchers who destroyed that village on the bay. May I some day see her dangling from the yard-arm! She is called the queen of the black coast. She is a Shemite woman, who leads black raiders. They harry the shipping and have sent many a good tradesman to the bottom."

From under the poop-deck Tito brought out quilted jerkins, steel caps, bows and arrows.

"Little use to resist if we're run down," he grunted. "But it rasps the soul to give up life without a struggle."

IT WAS just at sunrise when the lookout shouted a warning. Around the long point of an island off the starboard bow glided a long lethal shape, a slender serpentine galley, with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern. Forty oars on each side drove her swiftly through the water, and the low rail swarmed with naked blacks that chanted and clashed spears on oval shields. From the masthead floated a long crimson pennon.

"Bêlit!" yelled Tito, paling. "Yare! Put her about! Into that creek-mouth! If we can beach her before they run us down, we have a chance to escape with our lives!"

So, veering sharply, the *Argus* ran for the line of surf that boomed along the palm-fringed shore, Tito striding back and forth, exhorting the panting rowers to greater efforts. The master's black beard bristled, his eyes glared.

"Give me a bow," requested Conan. "It's not my idea of a manly weapon, but I learned archery among the Hyrkanians, and it will go hard if I can't feather a man or so on yonder deck."

Standing on the poop, he watched the serpent-like ship skimming lightly over the waters, and landsman though he was, it was evident to him that the *Argus* would never win that race. Already arrows, arching from the pirate's deck, were falling with a hiss into the sea, not twenty paces astern.

"We'd best stand to it," growled the Cimmerian; "else we'll all die with shafts in our backs, and not a blow dealt."

"Bend to it, dogs!" roared Tito with a passionate gesture of his brawny fist. The bearded rowers grunted, heaved at the oars, while their muscles coiled and knotted, and sweat started out on their hides. The timbers of the stout little galley creaked and groaned as the men fairly ripped her through the water. The wind had fallen; the sail hung limp. Nearer crept the inexorable raiders, and they were still a good mile from the surf when one of the steersmen fell gagging across the sweep, a long arrow through his neck. Tito sprang to take his place, and Conan, bracing his feet wide on the heaving poop-deck, lifted his bow. He could see the details of the pirate plainly now. The rowers were protected by a line of raised mantelets along the sides, but the warriors dancing on the narrow deck were in full view. These were painted and plumed, and mostly naked, brandishing spears and spotted shields.

On the raised platform in the bows stood a slim figure whose white skin glistened in dazzling contrast to the glossy ebon hides about it. Bêlit, without a

doubt. Conan drew the shaft to his ear —then some whim or qualm stayed his hand and sent the arrow through the body of a tall plumed spearman beside her.

Hand over hand the pirate galley was overhauling the lighter ship. Arrows fell in a rain about the *Argus,* and men cried out. All the steersmen were down, pincushioned, and Tito was handling the massive sweep alone, gasping black curses, his braced legs knots of straining thews. Then with a sob he sank down, a long shaft quivering in his sturdy heart. The *Argus* lost headway and rolled in the swell. The men shouted in confusion, and Conan took command in characteristic fashion.

"Up, lads!" he roared, loosing with a vicious twang of cord. "Grab your steel and give these dogs a few knocks before they cut our throats! Useless to bend your backs any more: they'll board us ere we can row another fifty paces!"

In desperation the sailors abandoned their oars and snatched up their weapons. It was valiant, but useless. They had time for one flight of arrows before the pirate was upon them. With no one at the sweep, the *Argus* rolled broadside, and the steel-beaked prow of the raider crashed into her amidships. Grappling-irons crunched into the side. From the lofty gunwales, the black pirates drove down a volley of shafts that tore through the quilted jackets of the doomed sailormen, then sprang down spear in hand to complete the slaughter. On the deck of the pirate lay half a dozen bodies, an earnest of Conan's archery.

The fight on the *Argus* was short and bloody. The stocky sailors, no match for the tall barbarians, were cut down to a man. Elsewhere the battle had taken a peculiar turn. Conan, on the high-pitched poop, was on a level with the pirate's deck. As the steel prow slashed into the *Argus,* he braced himself and kept his feet under the shock, casting away his bow. A tall corsair, bounding over the rail, was met in midair by the Cimmerian's great sword, which sheared him cleanly through the torso, so that his body fell one way and his legs another. Then, with a burst of fury that left a heap of mangled corpses along the gunwales, Conan was over the rail and on the deck of the *Tigress.*

In an instant he was the center of a hurricane of stabbing spears and lashing clubs. But he moved in a blinding blur of steel. Spears bent on his armor or swished empty air, and his sword sang its death-song. The fighting-madness of his race was upon him, and with a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes, he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck like a shambles with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.

Invulnerable in his armor, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spear-casts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

BELIT sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart. She was slender, yet formed like a goddess: at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian's pulse, even in the panting

fury of battle. Her rich black hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian.

She was untamed as a desert wind, supple and dangerous as a she-panther. She came close to him, heedless of his great blade, dripping with the blood of her warriors. Her supple thigh brushed against it, so close she came to the tall warrior. Her red lips parted as she stared up into his somber menacing eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "By Ishtar, I have never seen your like, though I have ranged the sea from the coasts of Zingara to the fires of the ultimate south. Whence come you?"

"From Argos," he answered shortly, alert for treachery. Let her slim hand move toward the jeweled dagger in her girdle, and a buffet of his open hand would stretch her senseless on the deck. Yet in his heart he did not fear; he had held too many women, civilized or barbaric, in his iron-thewed arms, not to recognize the light that burned in the eyes of this one.

"You are no soft Hyborian!" she exclaimed. "You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews were never softened by life amid marble walls."

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," he answered.

To the people of the exotic climes, the north was a mazy half-mythical realm, peopled with ferocious blue-eyed giants who occasionally descended from their icy fastnesses with torch and sword. Their raids had never taken them as far south as Shem, and this daughter of Shem made no distinction between Æsir, Vanir or Cimmerian. With the unerring instinct of the elemental feminine, she knew she had found her lover, and his race meant naught, save as it invested him with the glamor of far lands.

"And I am Bêlit," she cried, as one might say, "I am queen!"

"Look at me, Conan!" She threw wide her arms. "I am Bêlit, queen of the black coast. Oh, tiger of the North, you are cold as the snowy mountains which bred you. Take me and crush me with your fierce love! Go with me to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea! I am a queen by fire and steel and slaughter—be thou my king!"

His eyes swept the blood-stained ranks, seeking expressions of wrath or jealousy. He saw none. The fury was gone from the ebon faces. He realized that to these men Bêlit was more than a woman: a goddess whose will was unquestioned. He glanced at the *Argus*, wallowing in the crimson sea-wash, heeling far over, her decks awash, held up by the grappling-irons. He glanced at the blue-fringed shore, at the far green hazes of the ocean, at the vibrant figure which stood before him; and his barbaric soul stirred within him. To quest these shining blue realms with that white-skinned young tiger-cat—to love, laugh, wander and pillage——

"I'll sail with you," he grunted, shaking the red drops from his blade.

"Ho, N'Yaga!" her voice twanged like a bowstring. "Fetch herbs and dress your master's wounds! The rest of you bring aboard the plunder and cast off."

As Conan sat with his back against the poop-rail, while the old shaman attended to the cuts on his hands and limbs, the cargo of the ill-fated *Argus* was quickly shifted aboard the *Tigress* and stored in small cabins below deck. Bodies of the crew and of fallen pirates were cast overboard to the swarming sharks, while wounded blacks were laid in the waist to be bandaged. Then the grappling-irons

were cast off, and as the *Argus* sank silently into the blood-flecked waters, the *Tigress* moved off southward to the rhythmic clack of the oars.

As they moved out over the glassy blue deep, Bêlit came to the poop. Her eyes were burning like those of a she-panther in the dark as she tore off her ornaments, her sandals and her silken girdle and cast them at his feet. Rising on tiptoe, arms stretched upward, a quivering line of naked white, she cried to the desperate horde: "Wolves of the blue sea, behold ye now the dance—the mating-dance of Bêlit, whose fathers were kings of Askalon!"

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the blood-stained deck and dying men forgot death as they gazed frozen at her. Then, as the white stars glimmered through the blue velvet dusk, making her whirling body a blur of ivory fire, with a wild cry she threw herself at Conan's feet, and the blind flood of the Cimmerian's desire swept all else away as he crushed her panting form against the black plates of his corseleted breast.

2. *The Black Lotus*

In that dead citadel of crumbling stone
Her eyes were snared by that unholy sheen,
And curious madness took me by the throat,
As of a rival lover thrust between.
—*The Song of Bêlit.*

THE *Tigress* ranged the sea, and the black villages shuddered. Tom-toms beat in the night, with a tale that the she-devil of the sea had found a mate, an iron man whose wrath was as that of a wounded lion. And survivors of butchered Stygian ships named Bêlit with curse, and a white warrior with fierce blue eyes; so the Stygian princes remembered this man long and long, and their memory was a bitter tree which bore crimson fruit in the years to come.

But heedless as a vagrant wind, the *Tigress* cruised the southern coasts, until she anchored at the mouth of a broad sullen river, whose banks were jungle-clouded walls of mystery.

"This is the river Zarkheba, which is Death," said Bêlit. "Its waters are poisonous. See how dark and murky they run? Only venomous reptiles live in that river. The black people shun it. Once a Stygian galley, fleeing from me, fled up the river and vanished. I anchored in this very spot, and days later, the galley came floating down the dark waters, its decks blood-stained and deserted. Only one man was on board, and he was mad and died gibbering. The cargo was intact, but the crew had vanished into silence and mystery.

"My lover, I believe there is a city somewhere on that river. I have heard tales of giant towers and walls glimpsed afar off by sailors who dared go part-way up the river. We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city!"

Conan agreed. He generally agreed to her plans. Hers was the mind that directed their raids, his the arm that carried out her ideas. It mattered little to him where they sailed or whom they fought, so long as they sailed and fought. He found the life good.

Battle and raid had thinned their crew; only some eighty spearmen remained, scarcely enough to work the long galley. But Bêlit would not take the time to make the long cruise southward to the island kingdoms where she recruited her buccaneers. She was afire with eagerness for her latest venture; so the *Tigress* swung into the river-mouth, the oarsmen pulling strongly as she breasted the broad current.

They rounded the mysterious bend

that shut out the sight of the sea, and sunset found them forging steadily against the sluggish flow, avoiding sandbars where strange reptiles coiled. Not even a crocodile did they see, nor any four-legged beast or winged bird coming down to the water's edge to drink. On through the blackness that preceded moonrise they drove, between banks that were solid palisades of darkness, whence came mysterious rustlings and stealthy footfalls, and the gleam of grim eyes. And once an inhuman voice was lifted in awful mockery—the cry of an ape, Bêlit said, adding that the souls of evil men were imprisoned in these man-like animals as punishment for past crimes. But Conan doubted, for once, in a gold-barred cage in an Hyrkanian city, he had seen an abysmal sad-eyed beast which men told him was an ape, and there had been about it naught of the demoniac malevolence which vibrated in the shrieking laughter that echoed from the black jungle.

Then the moon rose, a splash of blood, ebony-barred, and the jungle awoke in horrific bedlam to greet it. Roars and howls and yells set the black warriors to trembling, but all this noise, Conan noted, came from farther back in the jungle, as if the beasts no less than men shunned the black waters of Zarkheba.

Rising above the black denseness of the trees and above the waving fronds, the moon silvered the river, and their wake became a rippling scintillation of phosphorescent bubbles that widened like a shining road of bursting jewels. The oars dipped into the shining water and came up sheathed in frosty silver. The plumes on the warrior's head-pieces nodded in the wind, and the gems on sword-hilts and harness sparkled frostily.

The cold light struck icy fire from the jewels in Bêlit's clustered black locks as she stretched her lithe figure on a leopardskin thrown on the deck. Supported on her elbows, her chin resting on her slim hands, she gazed up into the face of Conan, who lounged beside her, his black mane stirring in the faint breeze. Bêlit's eyes were dark jewels burning in the moonlight.

"Mystery and terror are about us, Conan, and we glide into the realm of horror and death," she said. "Are you afraid?"

A shrug of his mailed shoulders was his only answer.

"I am not afraid either," she said meditatively. "I was never afraid. I have looked into the naked fangs of Death too often. Conan, do you fear the gods?"

"I would not tread on their shadow," answered the barbarian conservatively. "Some gods are strong to harm, others, to aid; at least so say their priests. Mitra of the Hyborians must be a strong god, because his people have builded their cities over the world. But even the Hyborians fear Set. And Bel, god of thieves, is a good god. When I was a thief in Zamora I learned of him."

"What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them."

"Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?"

"But what of the worlds beyond the river of death?" she persisted.

"There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people," answered Conan. "In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their

souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity."

Bêlit shuddered. "Life, bad as it is, is better than such a destiny. What do you believe, Conan?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death. It may be the blackness averred by the Nemedian skeptics, or Crom's realm of ice and cloud, or the snowy plains and vaulted halls of the Nordheimer's Valhalla. I know not, nor do I care. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content."

"But the gods are real," she said, pursuing her own line of thought. "And above all are the gods of the Shemites—Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago, and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times.

"There is life beyond death, I know, and I know this, too, Conan of Cimmeria"—she rose lithely to her knees and caught him in a pantherish embrace—"my love is stronger than any death! I have lain in your arms, panting with the violence of our love; you have held and crushed and conquered me, drawing my soul to your lips with the fierceness of your bruising kisses. My heart is welded to your heart, my soul is part of your soul! Were I still in death and you fighting for life, I would come back from the abyss to aid you—aye, whether my spirit floated with the purple sails on the crystal sea of paradise, or writhed in the molten flames of hell! I am yours, and all the gods and all their eternities shall not sever us!"

A SCREAM rang from the lookout in the bows. Thrusting Bêlit aside, Conan bounded up, his sword a long silver glitter in the moonlight, his hair bristling at what he saw. The black warrior dangled above the deck, supported by what seemed a dark pliant tree trunk arching over the rail. Then he realized that it was a gigantic serpent which had writhed its glistening length up the side of the bow and gripped the luckless warrior in its jaws. Its dripping scales shone leprously in the moonlight as it reared its form high above the deck, while the stricken man screamed and writhed like a mouse in the fangs of a python. Conan rushed into the bows, and swinging his great sword, hewed nearly through the giant trunk, which was thicker than a man's body. Blood drenched the rails as the dying monster swayed far out, still gripping its victim, and sank into the river, coil by coil, lashing the water to bloody foam, in which man and reptile vanished together.

Thereafter Conan kept the lookout watch himself, but no other horror came crawling up from the murky depths, and as dawn whitened over the jungle, he sighted the black fangs of towers jutting up among the trees. He called Bêlit, who slept on the deck, wrapped in his scarlet cloak; and she sprang to his side, eyes blazing. Her lips were parted to call orders to her warriors to take up bow and spears; then her lovely eyes widened.

It was but the ghost of a city on which they looked when they cleared a jutting jungle-clad point and swung in toward the in-curving shore. Weeds and rank river grass grew between the stones of broken piers and shattered paves that had once been streets and spacious plazas and broad courts. From all sides except that toward the river, the jungle crept in, masking fallen columns and crumbling mounds with poisonous green. Here and there buckling towers reeled drunkenly against the morning sky, and broken pillars jutted up among the decaying walls. In the center space a marble pyramid was spired by a slim column, and on its pinnacle sat or squatted something that Conan supposed to be an image until his keen eyes detected life in it.

"It is a great bird," said one of the warriors, standing in the bows.

"It is a monster bat," insisted another.

"It is an ape," said Bêlit.

Just then the creature spread broad wings and flapped off into the jungle.

"A winged ape," said old N'Yaga uneasily. "Better we had cut our throats than come to this place. It is haunted."

Bêlit mocked at his superstitions and ordered the galley run inshore and tied to the crumbling wharfs. She was the first to spring ashore, closely followed by Conan, and after them trooped the ebon-skinned pirates, white plumes waving in the morning wind, spears ready, eyes rolling dubiously at the surrounding jungle.

Over all brooded a silence as sinister as that of a sleeping serpent. Bêlit posed picturesquely among the ruins, the vibrant life in her lithe figure contrasting strangely with the desolation and decay about her. The sun flamed up slowly, sullenly, above the jungle, flooding the towers with a dull gold that left shadows lurking beneath the tottering walls. Bêlit pointed to a slim round tower that reeled on its rotting base. A broad expanse of cracked, grass-grown slabs led up to it, flanked by fallen columns, and before it stood a massive altar. Bêlit went swiftly along the ancient floor and stood before it.

"This was the temple of the old ones," she said. "Look—you can see the channels for the blood along the sides of the altar, and the rains of ten thousand years have not washed the dark stains from them. The walls have all fallen away, but this stone block defies time and the elements."

"But who were these old ones?" demanded Conan.

She spread her slim hands helplessly. "Not even in legendry is this city mentioned. But look at the handholes at either end of the altar! Priests often conceal their treasures beneath their altars. Four of you lay hold and see if you can lift it."

She stepped back to make room for them, glancing up at the tower which loomed drunkenly above them. Three of the strongest blacks had gripped the handholds cut into the stone—curiously unsuited to human hands—when Bêlit sprang back with a sharp cry. They froze in their places, and Conan, bending to aid them, wheeled with a startled curse.

"A snake in the grass," she said, backing away. "Come and slay it; the rest of you bend your backs to the stone."

CONAN came quickly toward her, another taking his place. As he impatiently scanned the grass for the reptile, the giant blacks braced their feet, grunted and heaved with their huge muscles coiling and straining under their ebon skin. The altar did not come off the ground, but it revolved suddenly on its side. And simultaneously there was a grinding rumble above and the tower

came crashing down, covering the four black men with broken masonry.

A cry of horror rose from their comrades. Bêlit's slim fingers dug into Conan's arm-muscles. "There was no serpent," she whispered. "It was but a ruse to call you away. I feated; the old ones guarded their treasure well. Let us clear away the stones."

With herculean labor they did so, and lifted out the mangled bodies of the four men. And under them, stained with their blood, the pirates found a crypt carved in the solid stone. The altar, hinged curiously with stone rods and sockets on one side, had served as its lid. And at first glance the crypt seemed brimming with liquid fire, catching the early light with a million blazing facets. Undreamable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates: diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals, emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

With a cry Bêlit dropped to her knees among the blood-stained rubble on the brink and thrust her white arms shoulder-deep into that pool of splendor. She withdrew them, clutching something that brought another cry to her lips—a long string of crimson stones that were like clots of frozen blood strung on a thick gold wire. In their glow the golden sunlight changed to bloody haze.

Bêlit's eyes were like a woman's in a trance. The Shemite soul finds a bright drunkenness in riches and material splendor, and the sight of this treasure might have shaken the soul of a sated emperor of Shushan.

"Take up the jewels, dogs!" her voice was shrill with her emotions.

"Look!" A muscular back arm stabbed toward the *Tigress,* and Bêlit wheeled, her crimson lips a-snarl, as if she expected to see a rival corsair sweeping in to despoil her of her plunder. But from the gunwales of the ship a dark shape rose, soaring away over the jungle.

"The devil-ape has been investigating the ship," muttered the blacks uneasily.

"What matter?" cried Bêlit with a curse, raking back a rebellious lock with an impatient hand. "Make a litter of spears and manîles to bear these jewels —where the devil are you going?"

"To look to the galley," grunted Conan. "That bat-thing might have knocked a hole in the bottom, for all we know."

He ran swiftly down the cracked wharf and sprang aboard. A moment's swift examination below decks, and he swore heartily, casting a clouded glance in the direction the bat-being had vanished. He returned hastily to Bêlit, superintending the plundering of the crypt. She had looped the necklace about her neck, and on her naked white bosom the red clots glimmered darkly. A huge naked black stood crotch-deep in the jewel-brimming crypt, scooping up great handfuls of splendor to pass them to the eager hands above. Strings of frozen iridescence hung between his dusky fingers; drops of red fire dripped from his hands, piled high with starlight and rainbow. It was as if a black titan stood straddle-legged in the bright pits of hell, his lifted hands full of stars.

"That flying devil has staved in the water-casks," said Conan. "If we hadn't been so dazed by these stones we'd have heard the noise. We were fools not to have left a man on guard. We can't drink this river water. I'll take twenty men and search for fresh water in the jungle."

She looked at him vaguely, in her eyes the blank blaze of her strange passion,

her fingers working at the gems on her breast.

"Very well," she said absently, hardly heeding him. "I'll get the loot aboard."

THE jungle closed quickly about them, changing the light from gold to gray. From the arching green branches creepers dangled like pythons. The warriors fell into single file, creeping through the primordial twilights like black phantoms following a white ghost.

Underbrush was not so thick as Conan had anticipated. The ground was spongy but not slushy. Away from the river, it sloped gradually upward. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the green waving depths, and still there was no sign of water, either running stream or stagnant pool. Conan halted suddenly, his warriors freezing into basaltic statues. In the tense silence that followed, the Cimmerian shook his head irritably.

"Go ahead," he grunted to a sub-chief, N'Gora. "March straight on until you can no longer see me; then stop and wait for me. I believe we're being followed. I heard something."

The blacks shuffled their feet uneasily, but did as they were told. As they swung onward, Conan stepped quickly behind a great tree, glaring back along the way they had come. From that leafy fastness anything might emerge. Nothing occurred; the faint sounds of the marching spearmen faded in the distance. Conan suddenly realized that the air was impregnated with an alien and exotic scent. Something gently brushed his temple. He turned quickly. From a cluster of green, curiously leafed stalks, great black blossoms nodded at him. One of these had touched him. They seemed to beckon him, to arch their pliant stems toward him. They spread and rustled, though no wind blew.

He recoiled, recognizing the black lotus, whose juice was death, and whose scent brought dream-haunted slumber. But already he felt a subtle lethargy stealing over him. He sought to lift his sword, to hew down the serpentine stalks, but his arm hung lifeless at his side. He opened his mouth to shout to his warriors, but only a faint rattle issued. The next instant, with appalling suddenness, the jungle waved and dimmed out before his eyes; he did not hear the screams that burst out awfully not far away, as his knees collapsed, letting him pitch limply to the earth. Above his prostrate form the great black blossoms nodded in the windless air.

3. *The Horror in the Jungle*

Was it a dream the nighted lotus brought?
Then curst the dream that bought my sluggish life;
And curst each laggard hour that does not see
Hot blood drip blackly from the crimsoned knife.

—*The Song of Bêlit.*

FIRST there was the blackness of an utter void, with the cold winds of cosmic space blowing through it. Then shapes, vague, monstrous and evanescent, rolled in dim panorama through the expanse of nothingness, as if the darkness were taking material form. The winds blew and a vortex formed, a whirling pyramid of roaring blackness. From it grew Shape and Dimension; then suddenly, like clouds dispersing, the darkness rolled away on either hand and a huge city of dark green stone rose on the bank of a wide river, flowing through an illimitable plain. Through this city moved beings of alien configuration.

Cast in the mold of humanity, they were distinctly not men. They were winged and of heroic proportions; not a branch on the mysterious stalk of evolution that culminated in man, but the ripe

blossom on an alien tree, separate and apart from that stalk. Aside from their wings, in physical appearance they resembled man only as man in his highest form resembles the great apes. In spiritual, esthetic and intellectual development they were superior to man as man is superior to the gorilla. But when they reared their colossal city, man's primal ancestors had not yet risen from the slime of the primordial seas.

These beings were mortal, as are all things built of flesh and blood. They lived, loved, and died, though the individual span of life was enormous. Then, after uncounted millions of years, the Change began. The vista shimmered and wavered, like a picture thrown on a wind-blown curtain. Over the city and the land the ages flowed as waves flow over a beach, and each wave brought alterations. Somewhere on the planet the magnetic centers were shifting; the great glaciers and ice-fields were withdrawing toward the new poles.

The littoral of the great river altered. Plains turned into swamps that stank with reptilian life. Where fertile meadows had rolled, forests reared up, growing into dank jungles. The changing ages wrought on the inhabitants of the city as well. They did not migrate to fresher lands. Reasons inexplicable to humanity held them to the ancient city and their doom. And as that once rich and mighty land sank deeper and deeper into the black mire of the sunless jungle, so into the chaos of squalling jungle life sank the people of the city. Terrific convulsions shook the earth; the nights were lurid with spouting volcanoes that fringed the dark horizons with red pillars.

After an earthquake that shook down the outer walls and highest towers of the city, and caused the river to run black for days with some lethal substance spewed up from the subterranean depths, a frightful chemical change became apparent in the waters the folk had drunk for millenniums uncountable.

Many died who drank of it; and in those who lived, the drinking wrought change, subtle, gradual and grisly. In adapting themselves to the changing conditions, they had sunk far below their original level. But the lethal waters altered them even more horribly, from generation to more bestial generation. They who had been winged gods became pinioned demons, with all that remained of their ancestors' vast knowledge distorted and perverted and twisted into ghastly paths. As they had risen higher than mankind might dream, so they sank lower than man's maddest nightmares reach. They died fast, by cannibalism, and horrible feuds fought out in the murk of the midnight jungle. And at last among the lichen-grown ruins of their city only a single shape lurked, a stunted abhorrent perversion of nature.

Then for the first time humans appeared: dark-skinned, hawk-faced men in copper and leather harness, bearing bows —the warriors of pre-historic Stygia. There were only fifty of them, and they were haggard and gaunt with starvation and prolonged effort, stained and scratched with jungle-wandering, with blood-crusted bandages that told of fierce fighting. In their minds was a tale of warfare and defeat, and flight before a stronger tribe which drove them ever southward, until they lost themselves in the green ocean of jungle and river.

Exhausted they lay down among the ruins where red blossoms that bloom but once in a century waved in the full moon, and sleep fell upon them. And as they slept, a hideous shape crept red-eyed from the shadows and performed weird and

awful rites about and above each sleeper. The moon hung in the shadowy sky, painting the jungle red and black; above the sleepers glimmered the crimson blossoms, like splashes of blood. Then the moon went down and the eyes of the necromancer were red jewels set in the ebony of night.

When dawn spread its white veil over the river, there were no men to be seen: only a hairy winged horror that squatted in the center of a ring of fifty great spotted hyenas that pointed quivering muzzles to the ghastly sky and howled like souls in hell.

Then scene followed scene so swiftly that each tripped over the heels of its predecessor. There was a confusion of movement, a writhing and melting of lights and shadows, against a background of black jungle, green stone ruins, and murky river. Black men came up the river in long boats with skulls grinning on the prows, or stole stooping through the trees, spear in hand. They fled screaming through the dark from red eyes and slavering fangs. Howl of dying men shook the shadows; stealthy feet padded through the gloom, vampire eyes blazed redly. There were grisly feasts beneath the moon, across whose red disk a bat-like shadow incessantly swept.

Then abruptly, etched clearly in contrast to these impressionistic glimpses, around the jungled point in the whitening dawn swept a long galley, thronged with shining ebon figures, and in the bows stood a white-skinned giant in blue steel.

It was at this point that Conan first realized that he was dreaming. Until that instant he had had no consciousness of individual existence. But as he saw himself treading the boards of the *Tigress*, he recognized both the existence and the dream, although he did not awaken.

Even as he wondered, the scene shifted abruptly to a jungle glade where N'Gora and nineteen black spearmen stood, as if awaiting someone. Even as re realized that it was he for whom they waited, a horror swooped down from the skies and their stolidity was broken by yells of fear. Like men maddened by terror, they threw away their weapons and raced wildly through the jungle, pressed close by the slavering monstrosity that flapped its wings above them.

CHAOS and confusion followed this vision, during which Conan feebly struggled to awake. Dimly he seemed to see himself lying under a nodding cluster of black blossoms, while from the bushes a hideous shape crept toward him. With a savage effort he broke the unseen bonds which held him to his dreams, and started upright.

Bewilderment was in the glare he cast about him. Near him swayed the dusky lotus, and he hastened to draw away from it.

In the spongy soil near by there was a track as if an animal had put out a foot, preparatory to emerging from the bushes, then had withdrawn it. It looked like the spoor of an unbelievably large hyena.

He yelled for N'Gora. Primordial silence brooded over the jungle, in which his yells sounded brittle and hollow as mockery. He could not see the sun, but his wilderness-trained instinct told him the day was near its end. A panic rose in him at the thought that he had lain senseless for hours. He hastily followed the tracks of the spearmen, which lay plain in the damp loam before him. They ran in single file, and he soon emerged into a glade — to stop short, the skin crawling between his shoulders as he recognized it as the glade he had seen in his lotus-drugged dream. Shields and

spears lay scattered about as if dropped in headlong flight.

And from the tracks which led out of the glade and deeper into the fastnesses, Conan knew that the spearmen had fled, wildly. The footprints overlay one another; they weaved blindly among the trees. And with startling suddenness the hastening Cimmerian came out of the jungle onto a hill-like rock which sloped steeply, to break off abruptly in a sheer precipice forty feet high. And something crouched on the brink.

At first Conan thought it to be a great black gorilla. Then he saw that it was a giant black man that crouched ape-like, long arms dangling, froth dripping from the loose lips. It was not until, with a sobbing cry, the creature lifted huge hands and rushed toward him, that Conan recognized N'Gora. The black man gave no heed to Conan's shout as he charged, eyes rolled up to display the whites, teeth gleaming, face an inhuman mask.

With his skin crawling with the horror that madness always instils in the sane, Conan passed his sword through the black man's body; then, avoiding the hooked hands that clawed at him as N'Gora sank down, he strode to the edge of the cliff.

For an instant he stood looking down into the jagged rocks below, where lay N'Gora's spearmen, in limp, distorted attitudes that told of crushed limbs and splintered bones. Not one moved. A cloud of huge black flies buzzed loudly above the blood-splashed stones; the ants had already begun to gnaw at the corpses. On the trees about sat birds of prey, and a jackal, looking up and seeing the man on the cliff, slunk furtively away.

For a little space Conan stood motionless. Then he wheeled and ran back the way he had come, flinging himself with reckless haste through the tall grass and bushes, hurdling creepers that sprawled snake-like across his path. His sword swung low in his right hand, and an unaccustomed pallor tinged his dark face.

The silence that reigned in the jungle was not broken. The sun had set and great shadows rushed upward from the slime of the black earth. Through the gigantic shades of lurking death and grim desolation Conan was a speeding glimmer of scarlet and blue steel. No sound in all the solitude was heard except his own quick panting as he burst from the shadows into the dim twilight of the river-shore.

He saw the galley shouldering the rotten wharf, the ruins reeling drunkenly in the gray half-light.

And here and there among the stones were spots of raw bright color, as if a careless hand had splashed with a crimson brush.

Again Conan looked on death and destruction. Before him lay his spearmen, nor did they rise to salute him. From the jungle-edge to the river-bank, among the rotting pillars and along the broken piers they lay, torn and mangled and half-devoured, chewed travesties of men.

All about the bodies and pieces of bodies were swarms of huge footprints, like those of hyenas.

Conan came silently upon the pier, approaching the galley above whose deck was suspended something that glimmered ivory-white in the faint twilight. Speechless the Cimmerian looked on the Queen of the Black Coast as she hung from the yard-arm of her own galley. Between the yard and her white throat stretched a line of crimson clots that shone like blood in the gray light.

4. The Attack from the Air

The shadows were black around him,
  The dripping jaws gaped wide,
Thicker than rain the red drops fell;
But my love was fiercer than Death's black spell,
Nor all the iron walls of hell
  Could keep me from his side.
—*The Song of Bêlit.*

THE jungle was a black colossus that locked the ruin-littered glade in ebon arms. The moon had not risen; the stars were flecks of hot amber in a breathless sky that reeked of death. On the pyramid among the fallen towers sat Conan the Cimmerian like an iron statue, chin propped on massive fists. Out in the black shadows stealthy feet padded and red eyes glimmered. The dead lay as they had fallen. But on the deck of the *Tigress*, on a pyre of broken benches, spear-shafts and leopardskins, lay the Queen of the Black Coast in her last sleep, wrapped in Conan's scarlet cloak. Like a true queen she lay, with her plunder heaped high about her: silks, cloth-of-gold, silver braid, casks of gems and golden coins, silver ingots, jeweled daggers, and teocallis of gold wedges.

But of the plunder of the accursed city, only the sullen waters of Zarkheba could tell, where Conan had thrown it with a heathen curse. Now he sat grimly on the pyramid, waiting for his unseen foes. The black fury in his soul drove out all fear. What shapes would emerge from the blackness he knew not, nor did he care.

He no longer doubted the visions of the black lotus. He understood that while waiting for him in the glade, N'Gora and his comrades had been terror-stricken by the winged monster swooping upon them from the sky, and fleeing in blind panic, had fallen over the cliff; all except their chief, who had somehow escaped their fate, though not madness. Meanwhile, or immediately after, or perhaps before, the destruction of those on the river-bank had been accomplished. Conan did not doubt that the slaughter along the river had been massacre rather than battle. Already unmanned by their superstitious fears, the blacks might well have died without striking a blow in their own defense when attacked by their inhuman foes.

Why he had been spared so long, he did not understand, unless the malign entity which ruled the river meant to keep him alive to torture him with grief and fear. All pointed to a human or superhuman intelligence — the breaking of the water-casks to divide the forces, the driving of the blacks over the cliff, and last and greatest, the grim jest of the crimson necklace knotted like a hangman's noose about Bêlit's white neck.

Having apparently saved the Cimmerian for the choicest victim, and extracted the last ounce of exquisite mental torture, it was likely that the unknown enemy would conclude the drama by sending him after the other victims. No smile bent Conan's grim lips at the thought, but his eyes were lit with iron laughter.

The moon rose, striking fire from the Cimmerian's horned helmet. No call awoke the echoes; yet suddenly the night grew tense and the jungle held its breath. Instinctively Conan loosened the great sword in its sheath. The pyramid on which he rested was four-sided, one—the side toward the jungle—carved in broad steps. In his hand was a Shemite bow, such as Bêlit had taught her pirates to use. A heap of arrows lay at his feet, feathered ends toward him, as he rested on one knee.

Something moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-

out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low—twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes blazed as no true beast's eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breath-taking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point-blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through.

Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. His fiercely driven sword shore the first asunder; then the desperate impact of the others bore him down. He crushed a narrow skull with the pommel of his hilt, feeling the bone splinter and blood and brains gush over his hand; then, dropping the sword, useless at such deadly-close quarters, he caught at the throats of the two horrors which were ripping and tearing at him in silent fury. A foul acrid scent almost stifled him, his own sweat blinded him. Only his mail saved him from being ripped to ribbons in an instant. The next, his naked right hand locked on a hairy throat and tore it open. His left hand, missing the throat of the other beast, caught and broke its foreleg. A short yelp, the only cry in that grim battle, and hideously human-like, burst from the maimed beast. At the sick horror of that cry from a bestial throat, Conan involuntarily relaxed his grip.

One, blood gushing from its torn jugular, lunged at him in a last spasm of ferocity, and fastened its fangs on his throat—to fall back dead, even as Conan felt the tearing agony of its grip.

The other, springing forward on three legs, was slashing at his belly as a wolf slashes, actually rending the links of his mail. Flinging aside the dying beast, Conan grappled the crippled horror and with a muscular effort that brought a groan from his blood-flecked lips, he heaved upright, gripping the struggling, tearing fiend in his arms. An instant he reeled off balance, its fetid breath hot on his nostrils, its jaws snapping at his neck; then he hurled it from him, to crash with bone-splintering force down the marble steps.

As he reeled on wide-braced legs, sobbing for breath, the jungle and the moon swimming bloodily to his sight, the thrash of bat-wings was loud in his ears.

Stooping, he groped for his sword, and swaying upright, braced his feet drunkenly and heaved the great blade above his head with both hands, shaking the blood from his eyes as he sought the air above him for his foe.

Instead of attack from the air, the pyramid staggered suddenly and awfully beneath his feet. He heard a rumbling crackle and saw the tall column above him wave like a wand. Stung to galvanized life, he bounded far out; his feet hit a step, half-way down, which rocked beneath him, and his next desperate leap carried him clear. But even as his heels hit the earth, with a shattering crash like a breaking mountain the pyramid crumpled, the column came thundering down in bursting fragments. For a blind cataclysmic instant the sky seemed to rain shards of marble. Then a rubble of shattered stone lay whitely under the moon.

CONAN stirred, throwing off the splinters that half covered him. A glancing blow had knocked off his helmet and momentarily stunned him. Across his legs lay a great piece of the column, pinning him down. He was not sure that his legs were unbroken. His black locks were plastered with sweat; blood trickled from the wounds in his throat and hands. He hitched up on one arm, struggling with the debris that prisoned him.

Then something swept down across the stars and struck the sward near him. Twisting about, he saw it—*the winged one!*

With fearful speed it was rushing upon him, and in that instant Conan had only a confused impression of a gigantic man-like shape hurtling along on bowed and stunted legs; of huge hairy arms outstretching misshapen black-nailed paws; of a malformed head, in whose broad face the only features recognizable as such were a pair of blood-red eyes. It was a thing neither man, beast, nor devil, imbued with characteristics subhuman as well as characteristics superhuman.

But Conan had no time for conscious consecutive thought. He threw himself toward his fallen sword, and his clawing fingers missed it by inches. Desperately he grasped the shard which pinned his legs, and the veins swelled in his temples as he strove to thrust it off him. It gave slowly, but he knew that before he could free himself the monster would be upon him, and he knew that those black-taloned hands were death.

The headlong rush of the winged one had not wavered. It towered over the prostrate Cimmerian like a black shadow, arms thrown wide—a glimmer of white flashed between it and its victim.

In one mad instant she was there—a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther's. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing as the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster's breast.

"Bêlit!" screamed Conan. She flashed a quick glance toward him, and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava. Then she was gone, and the Cimmerian saw only the winged fiend which had staggered back in unwonted fear, arms lifted as if to fend off attack. And he knew that Bêlit in truth lay on her pyre on the *Tigress'* deck. In his ears rang her passionate cry: "Were I still in death and you fighting for life I would come back from the abyss——"

With a terrible cry he heaved upward,

hurling the stone aside. The winged one came on again, and Conan sprang to meet it, his veins on fire with madness. The thews started out like cords on his forearms as he swung his great sword, pivoting on his heel with the force of the sweeping arc. Just above the hips it caught the hurtling shape, and the knotted legs fell one way, the torso another as the blade sheared clear through its hairy body.

Conan stood in the moonlit silence, the dripping sword sagging in his hand, staring down at the remnants of his enemy. The red eyes glared up at him with awful life, then glazed and set; the great hands knotted spasmodically and stiffened. And the oldest race in the world was extinct.

Conan lifted his head, mechanically searching for the beast-things that had been its slaves and executioners. None met his gaze. The bodies he saw littering the moon-splashed grass were of men, not beasts: hawk-faced, dark-skinned men, naked, transfixed by arrows or mangled by sword-strokes. And they were crumbling into dust before his eyes.

Why had not the winged master come to the aid of its slaves when he struggled with them? Had it feared to come within reach of fangs that might turn and rend it? Craft and caution had lurked in that misshapen skull, but had not availed in the end.

Turning on his heel, the Cimmerian strode down the rotting wharfs and stepped aboard the galley. A few strokes of his sword cut her adrift, and he went to the sweep-head. The *Tigress* rocked slowly in the sullen water, sliding out sluggishly toward the middle of the river, until the broad current caught her. Conan leaned on the sweep, his somber gaze fixed on the cloak-wrapped shape that lay in state on the pyre the richness of which was equal to the ransom of an empress.

5. *The Funeral Pyre*

Now we are done with roaming, evermore;
No more the oars, the windy harp's refrain;
Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;
Blue girdle of the world, receive again
Her whom thou gavest me.

—*The Song of Bêlit.*

AGAIN dawn tinged the ocean. A redder glow lit the river-mouth. Conan of Cimmeria leaned on his great sword upon the white beach, watching the *Tigress* swinging out on her last voyage. There was no light in his eyes that contemplated the glassy swells. Out of the rolling blue wastes all glory and wonder had gone. A fierce revulsion shook him as he gazed at the green surges that deepened into purple hazes of mystery.

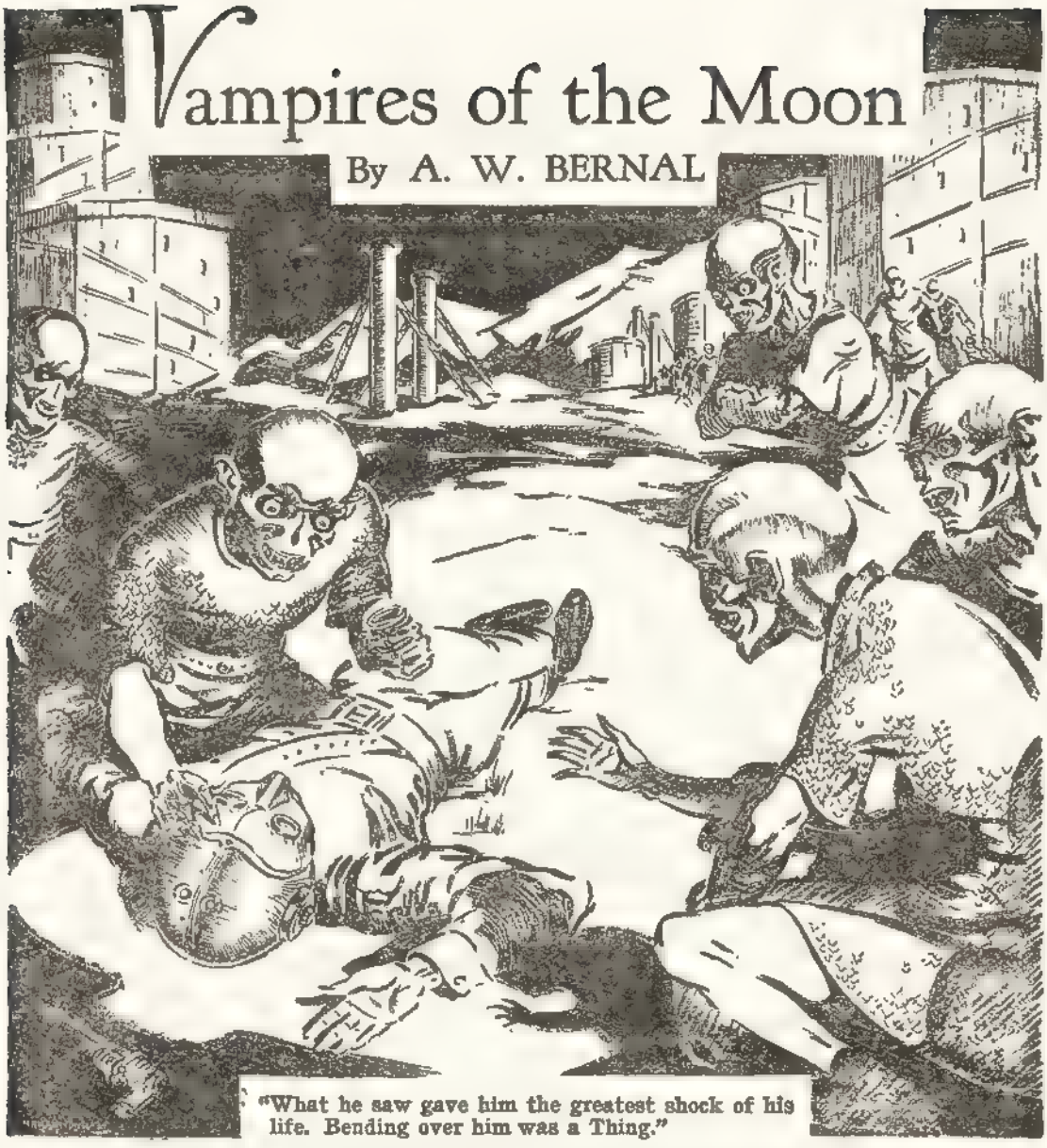
Bêlit had been of the sea; she had lent it splendor and allure. Without her it rolled a barren, dreary and desolate waste from pole to pole. She belonged to the sea; to its everlasting mystery he returned her. He could do no more. For himself, its glittering blue splendor was more repellent than the leafy fronds which rustled and whispered behind him of vast mysterious wilds beyond them, and into which he must plunge.

No hand was at the sweep of the *Tigress*, no oars drove her through the green water. But a clean tanging wind bellied her silken sail, and as a wild swan cleaves the sky to her nest, she sped seaward, flames mounting higher and higher from her deck to lick at the mast and envelop the figure that lay lapped in scarlet on the shining pyre.

So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red-stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded far out in the blue hazes and dawn splashed its rose and gold over the ocean.

Vampires of the Moon

By A. W. BERNAL



"What he saw gave him the greatest shock of his life. Bending over him was a Thing."

A sensational story of the Masters of the Moon and their mindless slaves—and a terrible threat against the inhabitants of Earth

"The strange and fearful story of the Moon City and its mind-vampires is one of the most astounding things recorded in the annals of the Trans-spatial Service Legion. . . ."

From Heidelich's *History of the Legion.*

Foreword

DEEP in the heart of one of the innumerable craters on the face of the moon is situated the row of tiny, lighted buildings that are the headquarters of the Moon Station of the Trans-spatial Service Legion. In these little artificially-temperatured, air-proof structures men of the Legion toil from Period to Period, wresting from Earth's desolate satellite all her age-old ores and metals for our use here on the mother planet. Strange happenings are welcome incidents in a life of dreary monotony to the

men of the Legion, hidden away as they are in an ice-bound, airless crater thousands of miles from Earth on the furthermost outpost of civilization.

Many dangerous and thrill-crowded events have taken place on the dead surface of the moon, but the Legion's encounter with the mind-vampires of the inner world is perhaps strangest of all.

● You who like your science-fiction to be weird (and when we say weird we mean WEIRD) will find a feast of good reading in this novel by A. W. Bernal. The story is not only a gripping tale of pseudo-science and thrilling adventures, but is also essentially a weird tale, fascinating in its horror and blood-chilling in its uncanny realism. You can not afford to pass this story by.

1. The Message from the Meteor IV

CAPTAIN RICHARD STARR, A. M. P., captain in charge of moon headquarters, settled himself in his swivel-chair. He removed his cap, tossing it onto the top of his roomy desk, disclosing by this action a head of neatly combed black hair, threaded with a few tinges of gray at the temples.

Clenching his pipe between white, even teeth and narrowing his steel-gray eyes dreamily, he sat tranquilly motionless for a few moments. Then he sighed and prepared to work.

After unbuttoning his scarlet tunic, he removed the broad white girdle that was his weapon-belt, and reached for his report blanks. He had just finished making his third inspection of the Period and would be occupied for several hours with the making out of his papers.

Busily he set about dictating to his mechanical stenographer. The machine's whir and click seemed very loud in the tiny offices of the Moon station, but it was a rather cheery sound and one that Starr liked.

Suddenly Starr frowned. The corridor outside was echoing with the rapid thumpings of running footsteps. Starr glanced out of his doorway to see what was causing the commotion. The look of annoyance on his face vanished, to be replaced by one of surprize. Quickly he shut off the dictating-machine and tossed his notes into his desk. He was alert and ready for the news he was about to receive.

For down the hallway was racing a white-faced Jerry Smith, lieutenant in charge of communications. A second later he burst into the room. Dispensing with the formality of a salute he began shouting excited words to his commanding officer.

"Captain!" he yelled wildly. "Captain! Another of our ships has disappeared!"

Starr was on his feet in an instant.

"What!" he shrieked. Without stopping to grab his cap he dashed out of the room after his already fleeing junior officer.

Breathless, the pair arrived at the communications room, Smith gasping unintelligible phrases at his anxious superior.

"Never mind! Let's hear it from the tape," Starr commanded as he threw himself into a chair near a large speaker. Panting from his exertions, Smith turned to a complicated apparatus and brought forth from its interior a roll of heavy tape. On this coil was trapped every message that had come in during the past twenty-four hours, all messages thus being automatically preserved for future reference.

With the roll in his hand the lieutenant sprinted across to the speaker in front

of which sat the worried Starr. Setting the apparatus into motion, Smith flung himself down beside his captain to listen.

"*Meteor IV* calling—*Meteor IV* calling," rumbled the instrument, then after a pause, "Hello, Smith. Listen! Great news! But wait——" The voice stopped an instant, then continued in the formal Legion routine words, "*Meteor IV* Commander John Starr reporting 'all safe'——"

"My God!" Starr leapt to his feet. His face grew ashen white; the hand that brushed his forehead trembled.

"My brother," he muttered faintly, "my brother—on that ship!" He sank, groaning, into the chair and gripped its arm-rests with a vise-like clutch.

Lieutenant Smith shut off the speaker and laid a sympathetic hand on the quivering shoulder of his commanding officer. For a period of deathly stillness, bowed head between his hands, Starr sat motionless. At last, with a visible effort, he pulled himself together. He raised his pale face, jaw set determinedly.

"Let's hear the message," he choked.

WITHOUT a word Smith threw the switch and the two men listened in strained silence to the rumbling, mechanical voice of the tape.

"——ere, I've got that old formula off my chest. Now I can talk like a human being. Say, listen, Smitty, old boy. Here's something you won't believe. *There is a city here in the moon!* Think of it! But listen, here's the way it happened.

"Dick—beg pardon!—Captain Richard Starr told me to send out a ship to try to locate the *America VII*. He didn't say for me not to go, so I just took command of the good old *Meteor IV* here, got Rusty Steele, Hal Bradley, and half a dozen others to come with me and set out.

"Now, I decided that practically the whole surface of the moon had already been searched to find the *America VII* and that other ship—the *Thunderbolt*, wasn't it?—you know, the one that vanished during the last Period. Well, as I say, although the surface had already been searched in vain efforts to locate these ships, no one had as yet cruised through any of the crater caverns. So that's where we went, and that's where we are now.

"We headed down that big crater just the other side of the Simonsburg group—the one we call the Punch Bowl—and nosed in and out among those giant bubble-like caves on its bottom.

"We found that one of the bubbles was an entrance to a regular honeycomb of natural passages and caves, leading right down toward the center of the moon. By Jupiter! it was intriguing to look out a forward port and see our guide-beam just sort of peter out without ever touching the end of the caves. It looked good to us, so down we cruised at half-speed, watching out for signs of either the *America VII* or the *Thunderbolt*.

"Venus, what caves! Rock and metal that—but you'll have to see for yourself. For an hour we cruised through that weird fairyland without ever once finding a cavern that led upward other than those behind us.

"Rusty got one of his crazy ideas and wanted to go outside without a suit. Said he read in a novel once where the hero walked around on the inside of the moon without a suit on account of the atmosphere growing denser toward the moon's center.

"We let him try it—a couple of fellows with oxygen-helmets stood by to grab him and pull him in just in case!—and blamed if there wasn't air out there! I know there's air up above where you are too, but this was real thick, breathable

air—cold as the void though! Rusty turned a funny blue all over and shivered so violently he could scarcely stand up. But in a minute he sort of recovered and, waving back his would-be rescuers, commenced running and jumping along the rocky cavern floor like a jack-rabbit. Once he slipped on a big lump of platinum—*platinum*, Smitty!—and when he cussed we could hear him inside the ship through an open port. The air was actually thick enough to carry sounds almost naturally.

"You can't realize how strange it seemed to find air outside the old boat. In five minutes the whole gang of us was cavorting about in that big, dark cavern miles under the surface of the moon. Smitty, you old half-lunged weaklings, you ought to get a whiff of that air. Cold and sharp and sweet as—as I don't know what. Man! You should have seen the red cheeks on us fellows when we climbed back into the bus.

"Eventually we got under way again—all ports opened wide—and headed down what seemed to be the last of the caves. We should have turned back then, only Rusty insisted there might be an opening behind a huge mount of rock at the far side of the place.

"Jupiter! What a thrill we got when we did turn our guide-beam on that pile of stone. Rusty, at the controls, opened his mouth so wide he almost cracked his jaw and his eyes bulged out like balloons. The darned idiot was so stupefied at what we saw that he ran the *Meteor IV* smack into the cavern wall. Luckily though, we were barely moving; so no damage was done to anything except Rusty himself, and that was done by us.

"Behind this forty-foot mound of debris was a huge black pit, dropping down, down, down. But that in itself was not so marvelous. It was the staircase. Yes, Smitty old robot, a *staircase!* Hewn out of the solid rock sides of this shaft was a gigantic flight of steps spiraling around and around, slanting ever downward into the blackness. It was like the threads of some Gargantuan piece of machinery: a comparatively tiny line circling down around the sides of this tremendous shaft.

"Imagine it, Smitty. Down here, eighty miles beneath the moon's surface, in a vast natural chain of caverns, is a giant staircase! Hewn out of the living rock by intelligent animals — human beings, I wonder?—ages ago. Yes, Smitty, this inconceivable staircase must be, judging roughly, some five thousand years old. You see, we—but I'll tell you later, Smitty. If I talk much longer I'm liable to fill up all your tape. I'll get on with the story.

"What had become of these people? Were some relics of this vanished race farther down in the shaft? The stairs must lead some place. We determined to find out where.

"WE DIDN'T lose any time dropping our boat down the shaft. The air, now surprizingly dense, fairly screamed as we shot down. Finally we had to slow down considerably because the shaft was beginning to incline from the vertical, gradually assuming a direction that was almost at right-angles with our initial descent.

"Then we sped down this horizontal passageway for a time; yet during all this period we had seen no trace of either our ships or vestiges of the ancient civilization. But when we cruised around an 'L' bend in the tunnel we immediately doused all our lights and proceeded at caution-speed; for not a hundred years ahead the tunnel opened out into a monstrous cave —a cave whose every surface glowed

brightly with a strange phosphorescent radiance!

"After the inky blackness of the tunnel this mile upon mile of glowing land was dazzling. For a time we could not see clearly, because although we had been using our cabin-lights, their shaded softness was nothing like the light of the cave.

"While I stood there gazing at the endless glowing expanse of land ahead, Rusty suggested that we stop to eat a bite of lunch and to send a message back to headquarters before proceeding. This we decided to do; especially after Rusty said we'd get no coffee until we did stop, inasmuch as his attempts along this line while we were under way had resulted in a none too invigorating shower-bath, when the pot tipped over on him.

"While waiting for the eats I looked through the 'scope to see if I could find anything. Blazing rockets! I certainly did. Quite a way off and devilishly hard to distinguish in that hazy glow was a city! Yes, Smitty, a full-grown, wheel-shaped city. I'll bet you don't believe me; but, on my honor, I did see it.

"I strained my eyes, trying to make out the thing more clearly, but it was no use. It was too jumpy on account of that infernal glow. After awhile I gave up and started sending this message.

"That brings us up to date. Tell Dick —I mean Captain Starr—that I'm sorry we've been gone so long. We'll just take a peep at the city and then shoot back to the Station. I haven't told the gang about the city yet, because they'd be heading for it without waiting for lunch. Particularly Rusty. He'd argue that we'd be asked to dinner there anyway.

"Well, here comes my tray of sandwiches, so I'll sign off. I'll let you hear from me as soon as we get under way again. So long."

The rumbling voice of the loud-speaker died out.

"There is another message?" asked the dejected and miserable Captain Starr.

"Yes, sir; shall I run it through?"

Starr sat for a time as though he had not heard. Then the blood came back to his face. His jaw came forward with a jerk. His eyes blazed.

"Yes, Smith, let's hear the other message," he gritted between clenched teeth. The table shook as he pounded his fist upon it. "I'll find that city and those beasts who have my brother, if I have to crawl there on my hands and knees! And when I get there——" He stopped and took hold of himself.

"All right, Smith. The other message," he finished more quietly.

2. "Smash It, You Fool!"

SMITH obediently turned up the tape by twisting the dial, then, at the sharp clicking from the speaker that precedes a message, dropped silently down again beside Starr.

"Click . . . click . . . click . . . *Meteor IV* again, Smith. I'll dispense with the old formula because I've already given it once, and besides, this is an informal message.

"I've just told the boys, and were they excited! It was funny. Rusty had that fool helmet of his on. You know that thought-helmet he's always fooling around with, don't you? It's that metal thought-transference contraption that he's been trying to perfect and simplify. Up to now he's never been able to get it so that any one but himself can operate it, except on rare occasions. He claims that only certain people have the right type of mind for sending out strong thought impulses. If it could be made to work, that helmet would be a great invention, but as it is, it is merely a plaything.

"Anyway, he had it on when I told the bunch. He was half under the table, getting his control-box which he had dropped. When he heard the news he let out a whoop and straightened up. The result was that he cracked his skull on the heavy table-edge and jammed the helmet down tight on his head! Not only that, but now it's *wedged* there! He couldn't get it off to save his life, and until we let him get at the tool-room, which we're not going to do for awhile, he'll have to wear the thing. It took four of the gang to hold him down while I locked the tool-room door and hid the key. Smitty, you ought to see him, you'd die laughing. . . .

"We're under way once more. Rusty refused to take the controls, so Bradley is guiding the *Meteor IV* this time. Rusty's pouting in a corner now. Next time you see him"—Captain Starr groaned—"call him the 'Sulking Achilles.' He'll love it. . . .

"We're out of the tunnel now and over the glowing surface of the cave. It seems to be some sort of growth that has completely covered everything.

"The entire landscape is one solid mass of this plant. Our ship casts no shadow whatever, for the light comes from below as well as from the sides and above.

"I—feel . . . I feel rather—queer. . . . My head is throbbing strangely. . . . The rest seem to be affected too——" the voice subsided to a mere mumbling.

Captain Starr gripped his chair until his knuckles showed white. None of the other ships had sent in a message. If he listened closely he might learn something of the methods of the kidnappers. The mumbling ceased and the voice boomed forth loud, clear and metallic.

"Yes. . . . They've all got it. . . . Every one. . . . No—Rusty. . . . All but Rusty. . . . He's all right. . . . He's asking what's wrong. . . . But I—I can't tell him. . . . No. . . . I can't say why, but I mustn't. . . . The ship is staggering . . . rocking as though Bradley . . . doesn't know how to run her. . . . The ship—our ship—is running smoothly toward the—our—city. . . . How distinct is the craft flying up there? . . . I can see her easily now. . . . The ship is very discernible against the glow. . . ."

The very short hair on Captain Starr's neck began to stiffen. He listened to the strange, scarcely intelligible message in a tense, stiff attitude. There was something horribly alien in the words that rumbled jerkily from the speaker.

"Wha—what was I saying? . . . I don't feel . . . I feel . . . ill. . . . That fool, Rusty. . . . He's shaking me. . . . I can't get to him. . . . I wonder. . . . Can it be that that thing he wears is . . . he's yelling at me now. . . . Stop him. . . . I must stop him. . . . He's taking the controls from Bradley! . . . No. . . . No! . . . Here, this will stop him. . . . No, no! . . . *No!* . . . Yes, that's it. . . . Harder! . . . Again! . . . Fine! . . . That helmet didn't save him from that blow with the wrench. . . . Ha! . . . Blood. . . . It is red. . . . Red, as ours used to be. . . . Primitive animals, these Outsiders. . . . I shall ask the Ten to allow me to take a few for my experiments. . . . But the Ten will not be through with them for nearly three weeks. . . . But after that—oh, Dick! *Dick! Dick!* . . . That monster. . . . I . . . Shut up, you fool! What are you saying? . . . There. . . . Now I've got him again. . . . He's got a brain, this one. . . ."

Starr was pacing back and forth in front of the speaker; beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and trickled down upon his face. His expression was one of intense agony. He seemed fairly to writhe when he heard the mechanical voice of the tape tell of Rusty being

struck down by his childhood companion, Jack Starr.

"Jack! Jack! What have you done?" he raved like a madman suddenly. "No, Jack! You didn't do it. *They* did it. They made you. They are responsible, not you. Who are they? What are they? Jack! Jack! Tell me, Jack! You must!"

But as the speaker resumed its unfeeling, guttural rumbling, Starr clenched his teeth, maintaining an attitude of forced calm.

". . . The city is very close now. . . . Our work is almost done. . . . What am I—that thing—doing? Talking, yes. But to whom? . . . Radio! . . . I must smash it. . . . No. . . . No. . . . Yes! . . . I must smash it. . . . How? . . . That wrench! . . . No. . . . Grasp it. . . . No. . . . Grasp it, you idiot! . . . No. . . . Now, lift it. . . . No. . . . Struggle—go on, struggle! . . . Higher. . . . *Higher.* . . . No. . . . Now. . . . Smash it. . . . No! . . . *Smash it!* . . . *No!* . . . Smash it. . . . *Smash it!* . . . SMASH IT. . . . SMA——"

Crash! The speaker fell silent. Captain Starr, his face sickly white, looked at Lieutenant Smith. "Jack is still alive," he hissed through clenched teeth. "He will be alive for three weeks. *But is he still human?*"

3. To the Rescue

THE next morning, after a sleepless night, Starr sat in his office thinking. His first wave of emotion was over now. He felt numbed, nerve-deadened. Except his brain. Like a tiny flame burning in ice it was. Plan after plan ran through his mind only to be torn to shreds and discarded.

Nothing mattered but to get to the Moon City where Jack was held prisoner. But how was he to get to the satellite's inner world? If he only had a ship!

The only other ship at the Moon Station at that time was the old hulk, *La Belle France;* and she was being patched up for transport use in the mines. The mines! He had it! Ore-carriers! One of them should be his ship. He sprang to his feet and dashed to the communications room.

Smith was just relieving his sergeant on "night" shift when Starr entered the room. At sight of his captain, the radioman saluted, then stood stiffly at attention, awaiting orders.

"Get me the mines, quick!" roared Starr. "Any mine! So long as they have some sort of ore-carrier or——"

Smith was not listening. He was busy at the televisor, working a number. "Here you are, sir," he exclaimed as soon as a face appeared on the screen.

It took but a moment for Starr to order the fastest ore-car to be brought to headquarters immediately. As he plugged off the set, Smith, eyes bright with anticipation, said:

"Starr! Can I go?"

Captain Starr glanced witheringly at the lieutenant. "You are supposed to be working for the T. S. L.!" he barked.

"Yes, sir!"

Smith sprang up and saluted smartly. But he was grinning with joy. His captain was over his hopeless spell. He was now a fighting man again. Action was all he craved!

"Stop grinning, you idiot!" thundered Starr, but he was smiling himself. His arm shot out, clenched itself tightly on Smith's shoulder. "You bet you can go. And we'll bring Jack back with us, won't we?"

While the two waited for the arrival of the ore-car, Starr discussed with his lieutenant the feasibility of finding Jack and rescuing him. Captain Starr had now become convinced that the feat would not

be at all impossible, and warmed to the prospect of the probable thrills and adventures in store for them.

"Yes, Smith," Starr grinned, "as long as the message said that Jack would not be hurt for nearly three weeks, and I am in fear for Jack's life no longer, I can look forward to our little jaunt with pleasure. It will prove quite exciting, I think."

But before Starr was through with the moon-men, he wished fervently that the excitement and danger of his journey into the inner world had never materialized. However, he had no presentiments at this time; being, on the contrary, rather lighthearted.

"You know," he was saying, "this reminds me of the time when I was a junior officer on the exploring ship, *Mayflower*. I got into some fine scrapes, then. I was an adventurous lad in my younger days, all right," concluded Starr, wagging a finger at the youthful Smith.

"Your younger days? I don't see that you've got gray hair now," laughed the lieutenant, in return.

"Listen here," snapped Captain Starr, eyes ablaze. "I haven't *any* gray hair. And when you are addressing me, say 'sir'. You are supposed to be a soldier. Can you get that through your thick skull?"

"Yes, sir," meekly responded Lieutenant Smith, and if it hadn't been for the fact that the blaze in Captain Starr's eyes had been replaced by a twinkle, the young man would have felt considerably discomfited.

Out of one of the many black openings in the sides of the crater which housed the Moon Station rose a lumbering, box-like structure.

Slowly the ore-conveyance nosed its way across the uneven surface of the frozen crater. A high-pitched, doleful clanking of loose machinery echoed faintly from the dark crater-sides. Drawing abreast of a row of lighted buildings, the ore-car sank jerkily to the ice-covered ground. Its wheels squeaked thinly in the rarefied atmosphere as it rolled awkwardly toward the air-lock in one of the structures.

A man in a bulky space-suit struggled out of the air-tight control-booth of the car, and in a moment the tight-fitting air-lock door swung shut behind the waddling, swollen figure. While the hiss of incoming air made itself audible, the figure began divesting itself of its clumsy suit. Soon it appeared as a normally proportioned Earthman attired in the scarlet and white of the Legion. It was the lieutenant in charge of mines.

Captain Richard Starr turned disgustedly away from the frosted window out of which he had been peering.

"So, lieutenant," he said scathingly. "That wreck on wheels—that dilapidated, broken-down, disintegrating pile of junk is the best ore-carrier in your mines, is it? That"—he waved a hand in the direction of the window—"that is the pick of the T. S. L. ore-cars? When I was a lieutenant, I should have been ashamed to be seen within a light-year of such a decrepit, rust-eaten thing as that."

"But, captain," the exasperated, red-faced lieutenant replied. "You did not ask for my prettiest car, sir. You asked for my speediest. I thought——"

"When I was a lieutenant we let our captain do the thinking. That's what they are supposed to be for. Well—how speedy is that heap of rust out there?"

"Maximum speed is fifteen miles per hour, sir."

"What?"

The lieutenant made a hopeless gesture. "My cars are for transporting ore,

sir. They're not supposed to be rocket-racers."

"That will be enough sarcasm, lieutenant. If there is anything I hate, it is sarcasm; especially in a man," Captain Starr said caustically. "What are *you* grinning at, Smith?

"So that is what we have to set out in, eh?" he remarked, returning to the point at issue after reprimanding Smith. "That mass of junk is to be our battleship. Well, lieutenant, take——" and Starr rambled off into technicalities concerning the transformation of the ore-car.

The next "morning" the ore-car was all in readiness. During the last twenty-four hours, it had been subjected to a thorough overhauling and cleaning; all superfluous weight removed, it was now nothing more than a skeleton structure with the air-tight control-booth in front. A small but deadly flame-thrower—the most powerful of compact weapons at this period—had been fastened to the conveyance for armament.

HAVING slept but little, Starr spent most of his sleeping-period in attempting to formulate a plan of battle. But the gong that sounded a new "day" found him yet unprepared. The only thing he was sure of was the fact that he must get to the Moon City as rapidly as the ore-car would take him there.

"Well, as long as our cruiser is primed for battle," said Captain Starr to Lieutenant Smith, when the latter had brought news that the ore-car was in readiness, "we may as well get started. Are you ready?"

It did not take Starr long to instruct his second-in-command to take charge of the Moon Station during his absence. He did not say where he was going, but left a sealed envelope with the officer which was to be opened in case he, Starr, did not return within a week, and which would inform the authorities what had happened.

Then he buckled on his weapon-belt, and motioning for Smith to do the same, left the offices, making his way toward the air-lock.

In a very few minutes Starr and Smith were encased in space-suits, and were leaping grotesquely over the icy crater-bottom.

When Smith had sealed the door of the converted ore-car shut behind him, Starr started the heating and oxygen-generating appliances, and it was not long before the pair were wriggling out of their space-suits.

No trouble was experienced in finding the crater with the "bubbles" in its bottom, and down into these the rejuvenated ore-car dropped, forging along at about twenty miles an hour. Captain Richard Starr and Lieutenant Jerry Smith were off on their journey.

4. "We're Going to Crash!"

SINCE the probable speed of the *Meteor IV* was about three times that of the ore-car over the same ground, the impatient Starr was forced to lie back and pass the long hours away with idle conversation.

During this time Smith, who had but recently been graduated from the U. A. F. to the Legion and consequently did not know all its history, eagerly inquired into the story of the Legion and why traces of a lunar civilization had never before been discovered. Starr, glad of the opportunity to pass away the time, willingly complied with the request and related a brief sketch of lunar history.

"Not so very long ago the Trans-spatial Service Legion was non-existent," Captain Starr began. "It has been some eighty-seven years since the moon was claimed for the World Government by one Isaac

Simonsburg, one of the first men ever to reach this satellite.

"It was he who discovered the rich lunar deposits of iron, gold, silver, and all the other useful elements, including a liberal sprinkling of radium. He realized how invaluable this information was, due to the steady petering out of the mines back on Earth, and so spent all his time here in locating veins of ores suitable to be developed into mines, rather than searching for signs of a vanished race.

"As soon as Simonsburg returned to Earth the World Government gave him more money than he could spend in two lifetimes, and decided to organize a company to import the desired ores to the mother planet.

"The Trans-spatial Service Legion was the result of this decision. When the Council decided that the T. S. L. was to be created, they agreed that the best thing to do would be to cut down the United Aerial Forces—which is, as you know, the only thing in the line of armies or navies that Earth yet maintains—and to transfer these men to the new Legion. That is why we are strictly a military organization," and he pointed to his collar and shoulder insignia as an example.

"Private parties were forbidden to set foot on the moon without special permission from the Council. That prevented all further exploration on the part of the public. When people clamored for news of the strange, new world, the World Government allowed the televisor-reporters to investigate a few craters, take one or two quick trips to the other side of the moon, then shipped them home. And that is as far as the thing went. The only real investigating that has been done has been accomplished by men stationed at the Moon Station, and that only on the sly.

"It is certain that no one ever dreamed of finding a city *inside* the moon, and no one even tried to get to the inner world. That is, no one did until last Period. Then the *Thunderbolt* was sent out to explore some far-away spot where a vast deposit of copper was reported to have been found. Whether or not the *Thunderbolt* was stolen by the moon-men is not certain, yet somehow she vanished, leaving no trace.

"Twenty hours after she disappeared, that Period was up. Our relief fleet was informed of the ship's disappearance and was left the task of locating her. The *America VII* was sent out to search the moon's surface, and promptly ceased radioing reports of her progress to us. I ordered out the *Meteor IV* immediately, for I was considerably worried. And now the moon-men have got her too!"

DURING this time Smith had been at the controls. Now Starr took over the guidance of the ore-car while the lieutenant manipulated the somewhat feeble searchlight. In all their cruising thus far, the pair had seen nothing singular outside the natural, fantastically shaped stalactites and stalagmites, around which they occasionally had to dodge. So far they had not even reached the spot where the shaft and its wonderful staircase were situated.

But now an excited cry broke from both men simultaneously.

"What is that, ahead there?" exclaimed Starr breathlessly. "It is the shaft! Yes, it is the shaft, at last!"

As they drew nearer to the huge mound of earth that was bathed in the probing finger of the searchlight, the two no longer had any doubt that it was the pile of debris mentioned by the younger Starr in his first message.

The scent was growing warm! In a little more than three hours now they should reach the cavern of light. Captain

Starr exulted at the thought. He could scarcely contain himself for eagerness.

"Here we are above the shaft," said the thrilled Starr to the no less enthusiastic Smith. "Shall we descend?"

"Righto, sir. Without delay."

There came a clicking as Starr punched the keyboard. With a wheeze, the ore-car stopped its horizontal flight, and after hovering a second, commenced very slowly to sink into the blackness of the pit.

Five minutes passed in utter silence.

"Blast it!" fumed the elder man at last. "What is the matter with this infernal trash-pile, anyway?" He leaned forward, glaring at the speed indicator. With a grunt of irritation, Captain Starr turned to his companion. "Is it all right with you, lieutenant, if I drop her nose down? We might eventually get to the bottom, that way."

"That's all right with me, sir. I'm strapped in."

"Good. Here we go!"

Immediately the odd-looking conveyance pivoted so that it hung nose downward. With a cough and a little spurt of flame, it suddenly shot down at terrific speed. The rush of air whistled past the plummeting ore-car; the two breathless occupants clung desperately to their seats.

Down they roared, at ever-increasing speed. The loosely pivoted searchlight swung wildly to and fro, lighting up first one side, then another of the roughly circular shaft.

"I think I see the bottom!" yelled Smith hoarsely. "Slow her down!"

Starr, frightened, reached for the control-board. The swinging searchlight played momentarily on a sharp outcropping of rock immediately below. Starr's horrified eyes saw it and he jabbed frantically at the keys with both hands. He shrieked:

"Look out! We're going to crash!"

5. In the Moon City

LIEUTENANT Samuel Haddon Steele—known to his intimates more simply as "Rusty" Steele—groaned and struck out feebly. Something was tugging at his head, evidently trying to pull it from his shoulders. At each pull, a searing pain shot through his brain, causing him great agony.

"Lemme 'lone," he muttered ferociously, if a bit thickly. He grabbed his tormenter by the arm. It did not then appear strange to him that the arm felt like nothing so much as a bundle of wire. His brain was too numbed to be astonished at anything.

At his touch the arm jerkily retreated. Finding the pain in his head diminishing to a mere throbbing ache, Steele managed to open his eyes. What he saw gave him the greatest shock of his life.

Bending over him was—a Thing. In spite of the fact that all Steele could see was the face, with its ancient, parchment skin drawn tightly as a drum over the skull, he shivered with nausea. Huge, yellowish eyes that held a vacant look gazed into his own from deep in sunken sockets, like a dead man's. The head was totally devoid of hair, and the veinless pate shone like a polished surface.

Nose there was none, unless a shrivelled flap of skin in the center of the grisly face could be flattered by the name. But it was the Thing's mouth that chilled Steele with horror. This was merely an ugly gash above the bony chin. The lips were drawn tightly back over the bloodless gums, disclosing a double row of rotten yellow fangs in the mirthless grin of a skeleton.

Steele shuddered and motioned for the Thing to go away. Like an automaton the ghastly monstrosity backed away a few feet and stood motionless.

"I hope this is a dream," breathed

Steele, sitting up. He placed a shaky hand to his throbbing head and was surprized to find his curiously rust-red, curly hair was still covered by his thought-helmet. It had been the Thing's endeavors to pry it loose that had awakened Steele to consciousness. His hand came away sticky with a creamy ointment.

In spite of himself the T. S. L. man's eyes turned themselves in a fascinated gaze toward the Thing. He noted with interest that the Thing was clothed in a garment of gleaming chain mail. Its knobby hand held a small can of the stuff that was on Steele's forehead.

"Sizzling suns!" remarked Steele to himself. "I've been nursed back to consciousness by a living mummy!"

Vainly striving to recall how he had come to be lying at the feet of the mummy-man, Steele cast about his surroundings for a clue. That he was in some sort of cell was easily apparent by reason of the stone walls of the room as well as by the sturdy metal door with its heavy complicated locks on its outside surface. Also the single tiny window, crisscrossed with a series of steel bars, gave a prison-like effect to the room.

Overcoming his repulsion, Steele addressed to the Thing this remark: "Say, Oswald, where are we and how did we happen to get together?"

The mummy-man stood vacantly staring at the flippant Earthman without a sound. Steele realized the absurdity of expecting this hideous denizen of the inner world to comprehend him. With knitted brow, the Legion man sought to clarify his befogged mind.

In a few seconds the whole thing came back to him. He remembered all the insane happenings aboard the *Meteor IV* which led up to his being struck down with a heavy wrench by his childhood comrade, Jack Starr. After that had come darkness, until he had opened his eyes to find himself in this cell with his grotesque captor.

Yet he still did not know what had occurred to bring him inside this stone cell, and now he racked his brain to find a method of conversing with the mummy-man. Here at last was an ideal opportunity for using his thought-helmet.

Twisting the dial that tuned in on the various "thought-wave lengths"—which varied in different people—Steele concentrated hard. He continued to twirl the dial slowly, and finally got a result.

"If you hear this, raise your right hand," was his thought, and he was elated in the extreme when the mummy-man's hand came up with a jerk. Being careful to leave the tuning-dial untouched, Steele tried another thought.

"Concentrate on your name."

In the Earthman's brain there suddenly appeared a thought seemingly expressed just as though the mummy-man had spoken it in good, clear English.

"I have no name. I am numbered 798-BV-46. You need not waste your effort in thinking so hard. I can get your thought impulses quite plainly."

The joyful Steele demanded of the silent, weird being before him: "How did I get here? Was it you who drugged my friends and——"

Keen and cold as a cut from a knife the reply of the creature etched itself in Steele's mind before he had got his own thoughts into proper sending order.

"I am merely the temporary mouthpiece of the Ten," was the message. "If you wish an interview with the Ten, who will answer your questions if they so deign, follow me." And the gaunt monster stepped jerkily into the passageway outside the cell.

Realizing the communication was more of a command than an invitation, Steele

followed the mummy-man with alacrity, consumed with curiosity about the strange world he was about to view. As he emerged from his cell the Earthman noticed that two more of the dead-faced mummy-men had joined him and his guide. These too, he noted, wore tunics of chain-mail, and he decided that the garment was the common attire of the moon-beings.

THE journey from the tower—for in such a place had Steele been incarcerated—to the ground was a nightmare experience. The cold stone hallways were filled with the grotesque, machine-like moon-men, who went their various ways with dull, vacant faces, paying not the slightest heed to the newcomer.

Steele saw with a shiver of horror that not infrequently the mummy-men were minus a natural arm or leg and had a metal one in its stead. These unfortunates seemed unmindful of their artificial limb and used it as deftly as they did their natural ones. All of them seemed to be outfitted with metal feet joined to their ankles, on which they clattered noisily about their business.

Not once did Steele see two of the mummy-men engage in conversation. Except for the clatter of metal feet on stone floor, the workers were as silent as ghosts, uttering not the tiniest sound.

Nearly all the moon-men bore burdens of some sort, ranging everywhere from baskets of strangely colored powders for which Steele could conceive no possible use, to large slabs of shiny metal. The mazes of whirring machinery glimpsed through half-open doors gave the Earthman the impression that he was in a mighty factory. What was being manufactured he had not the slightest conception.

The little party had long since ceased descending the wide, gently sloping ramps that connected the different floors, and finally a mighty door of heavy metal swung open before them, and the Earthman and his guides stepped upon a heavy carpet of spongy, rubber-like growth of luminous plants. A chill breeze swept refreshingly past the Earthman and was gone. They were outside the building.

6. Traitor?

STEELE looked about him with interest. The massive stone structure from which he had just emerged was part of a regular chain of like edifices stretching out in a gigantic circle. There were perhaps a hundred of the solid stone buildings enclosing Steele and his guards within a circular courtyard with a radius of approximately a mile, as near as Steele could judge.

The T. S. L. man turned his gaze toward the front, as the party started to march out over the carpet of phosphorescent weed toward the middle of the enclosure. In what appeared to be the mathematical center of it stood a group of glittering metal palaces. The reflection of light from the silvery spires and turrets almost blinded Steele after his sojourn in the semi-darkness of the outer stone city. The gleaming block of fairy-like castles seemed as unreal as a mirage. Steele blinked and looked again to see if they were still there.

A peculiar rhythmic sound broke into the Earthman's consciousness, and looking down, he beheld its cause. The brightly glowing moon plants were thick underfoot, and when each of the little party set down a foot a number of the bulbous brittle things were crushed. As each bulb went flat with a hollow pop, a tiny fat writhing thing slid away from the advancing feet with a gliding, snake-like motion.

In fascination Steele stopped to follow one of the living seeds on its course. The creamy-white object soon ceased its wrigglings and, upending itself in a little hollow between two of the bulbs, became rigid. In two minutes the visible portion had swollen into a glowing ball fully half the size of the shining globes around it. The somewhat nauseated Steele imagined that if he waited for perhaps an hour the thing would become full-grown and burst, sending a new seed out to begin a new life-cycle.

Steele hurried forward, desiring to cross the patch of moon-plant as soon as possible. Was the ghastly thing animal or plant? He could not hazard a guess. His thought-cell to his guards remained unanswered. Not since they had left his cell had Steele been able to elicit a reply from any of them. And pondering over their reticence, the Earthman forgot about the slimy worm-things that came from the glowing bulbs.

In a few moments more the strange quartet had entered one of the metal castles, the Earthman discovering with some surprize that there were even some of the burden-laden workers there. Without pause the moon-men led the way up one of several metal ramps—everything was metal here, Steele noticed—toward the upper floors.

Steele suddenly bethought himself of his forehead and its ointment-covered cut. Reaching up a cautious finger he touched the place that was daubed with sticky stuff. To his utter astoundment the ugly gash was already partly healed! It was now no more than a slight cut, due to the magic of the moon-man's salve. Steele's estimation of the mummy-men rose a notch or two.

And then a strange thing happened.

Steele, with some difficulty, had finally managed to wriggle out of the battered thought-helmet and was examining it to see if it had been injured in any way. Satisfied that it was in perfect working order, if somewhat dented, Steele was about to place the headpiece back where it belonged when he caught the staring eyes of one of his captors boring down into his mind, chillingly. For the barest fraction of a second the two gazed at each other; then Steele became aware of a sudden unaccountable impulse to toss away his helmet. The desire grew strong within him and he raised the glittering object preparatory to dashing it against the wall.

Then with an effort he managed to wrench loose his fascinated eyes from the yellow ones of the moon-thing. Quickly he jammed the helmet back on his head and fastened the chin-strap securely. The mummy-man's eyes were no longer hypnotic; they were only dull and vacant. Steele buttoned up his tunic, as he shivered with a chill. What was ailing him? Why should he desire to throw away his thought-helmet when it had proved so useful to him in this strange inner world of the moon?

The Earthman glanced sharply at his guards. All three were staring straight to the front, trudging up the ramp.

HE DID not have long to muse over his recent extraordinary behavior, for at that moment the Earthman was led off the ramp into a level passage where he saw something that made his heart leap.

At the far end of the straight corridor Steele glimpsed a scarlet and white uniform. It was Jack Starr!

"Jack!" Steele shouted and started off down the hall.

"Wait."

A thin but powerful arm reached out and clenched itself on the Earthman's wrist.

"It is not the wish of the Ten that you see your comrade now," said one of the mummy-men tonelessly, yet somehow conveying the impression of finality.

The fingers around Steele's wrist hurt. He flared into anger and wrenched his arm loose. Without a word he strode off toward the retreating Jack Starr, who appeared not to have heard his name called. Steele had not taken two steps before one of the moon-men grasped him roughly by the shoulder, spinning him around.

The resentful Earthman said nothing. Instead, he drew back his arm and let fly at his tormenter, then ran after his comrade. The mummy-man Steele had hit tumbled backward to the floor and did not rise; but the other guards were after the running Earthman instantly.

But they could not catch the fleet-footed Steele. Dodging in and out among the burden-laden workers, Steele swiftly drew close to his slowly walking friend before he met the least opposition. He was not three yards behind the unhearing Starr when some workers dropped their bundles and faced him menacingly.

"Turn back, Outsider. Turn back! The Ten order it!" one said, then collapsed as Steele plunged headlong into him like a football player.

A second later he stood at Starr's side.

"Jack! You're all right?" he exclaimed; then: "What's the matter? Don't you know me?"

The other had slowly set down a slab of shiny metal he had been carrying, turning to face Steele. Starr's clouded eyes, which gave Steele the impression that they were blind, held no light of recognition. Steele stood looking at his friend, dumfounded.

Without warning, Starr suddenly swung his fist full into his comrade's face. Steele dropped heavily to the floor, stunned by the blow.

"Hereafter see that you obey the Ten," said Starr in icy reprimand. Turning on his heel, he picked up his sheet of metal and disappeared around the corner with his burden.

The mummy-man Steele had struck dispassionately helped the dazed Earthman to his feet. "Come. Will you follow now?" was all he said.

Without further resistance, the bewildered Steele, rubbing his bruised jaw, accompanied the automaton-like guides down the hall until they stopped in front of a ponderous, thickly engraved metal door. Its surfacing was a solid mass of intricate, fantastic design; a shiny plaque in the center of the magnificent tracings bore a gem-inlaid series of hieroglyphics. Slowly, majestically, the massive portal swung noiselessly inward.

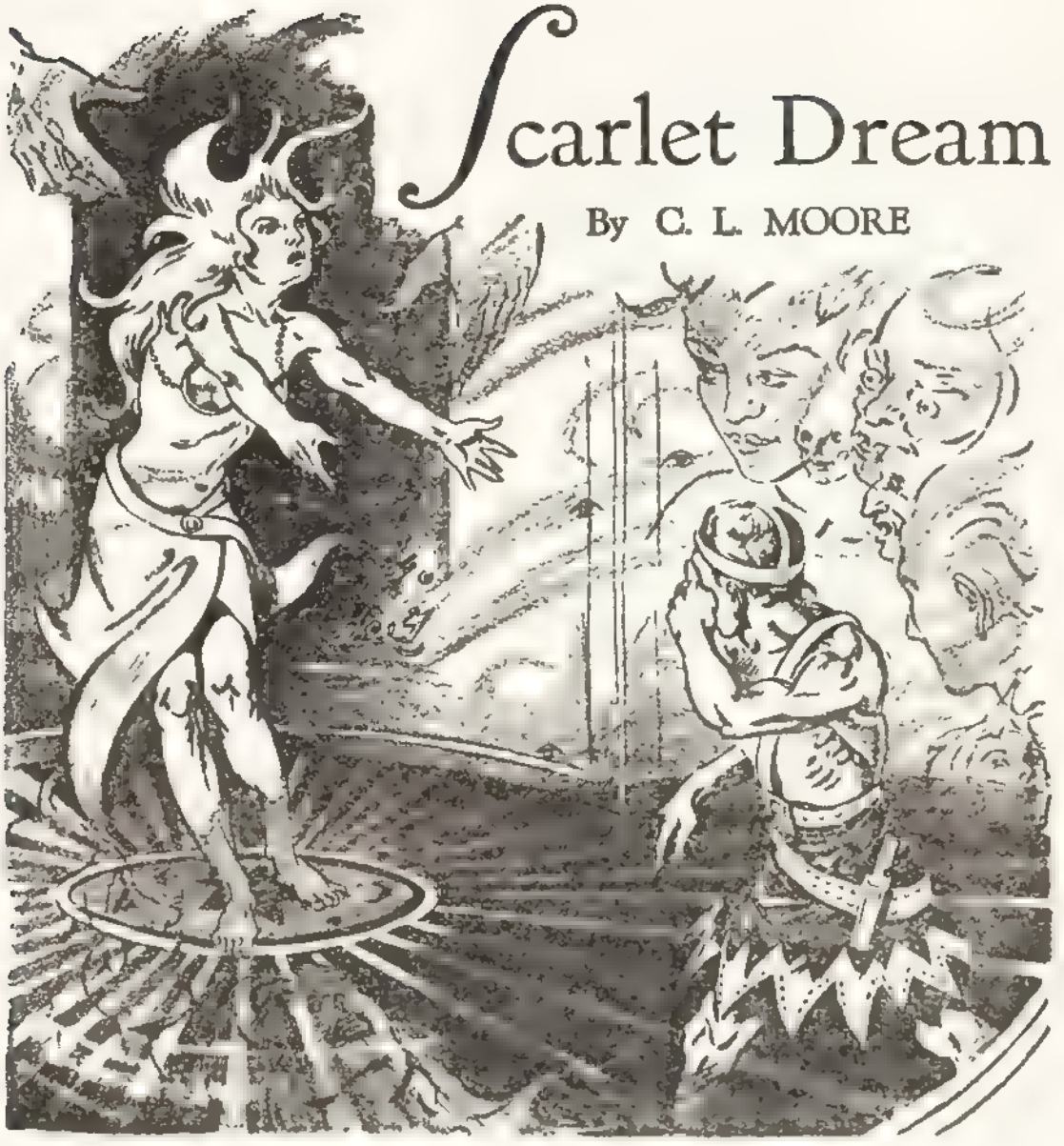
Steele had been vainly struggling to solve the mystery of Starr's actions, trying to substitute something for the dreadful solution that the lieutenant had turned traitor and was now in the employ of the moon-men; but now he put the puzzle aside in anticipation of what lay on the other side of the jewel-incrusted door.

He guessed instantly that in the immense room beyond was the spot where he was to have his interview with the Ten —the rulers of the Moon City. At the gesture of the moon-men the Earthman, drawing himself stiffly erect and presenting a striking picture in spite of his dirt-streaked uniform, strode forward with dignified grace into the ornate council room of the Moon City. He was the first interplanetary ambassador, and as fitting a specimen of Earth's finest as could be found anywhere.

The terrible plan of the Masters of the Moon to enslave the Earth and transform its inhabitants into mindless robots will be revealed in the sensational chapters of this story in next month's WEIRD TALES. Don't miss it.

Scarlet Dream

By C. L. MOORE



"The blood-red lips writhed apart to shriek a Word."

An utterly strange and weird story about Northwest Smith—a startling tale of eery adventures in another dimension of space

NORTHWEST SMITH bought the shawl in the Lakkmanda Markets of Mars. It was one of his chiefest joys to wander through the stalls and stands of that greatest of marketplaces whose wares are drawn from all the planets of the solar system, and beyond. So many songs have been sung and so many tales written of that fascinating chaos called the Lakkmanda Markets that there is little need to detail it here.

He shouldered his way through the colorful cosmopolitan throng, the speech of a thousand races beating in his ears, the mingled odors of perfume and sweat and spice and food and the thousand nameless smells of the place assailing

his nostrils. Venders cried their wares in the tongues of a score of worlds.

As he strolled through the thick of the crowd, savoring the confusion and the odors and the sights from lands beyond counting, his eye was caught by a flash of that peculiar geranium scarlet that seems to lift itself bodily from its background and smite the eye with all but physical violence. It came from a shawl thrown carelessly across a carved chest, typically Martian drylander work by the exquisite detail of that carving, so oddly at variance with the characteristics of the harsh dryland race. He recognized the Venusian origin of the brass tray on the shawl, and knew the heap of carved ivory beasts that the tray held as the work of one of the least-known races on Jupiter's largest moon, but from all his wide experience he could draw no remembrance of any such woven work as that of the shawl. Idly curious, he paused at the booth and asked of its attendant,

"How much for the scarf?"

The man—he was a canal Martian—glanced over his shoulder and said carelessly, "Oh, that. You can have it for half a *cris*—gives me a headache to look at the thing."

Smith grinned and said, "I'll give you five dollars."

"Ten."

"Six and a half, and that's my last offer."

"Oh, take the thing." The Martian smiled and lifted the tray of ivory beasts from the chest.

Smith drew out the shawl. It clung to his hands like a live thing, softer and lighter than Martian "lamb's-wool." He felt sure it was woven from the hair of some beast rather than from vegetable fiber, for the electric clinging of it sparkled with life. And the crazy pattern dazzled him with its utter strangeness. Unlike any pattern he had seen in all the years of his far wanderings, the wild, leaping scarlet threaded its nameless design in one continuous, tangled line through the twilight blue of the background. That dim blue was clouded exquisitely with violet and green—sleepy evening colors against which the staring scarlet flamed like something more sinister and alive than color. He felt that he could almost put his hand between the color and the cloth, so vividly did it start up from its background.

"Where in the universe did this come from?" he demanded of the attendant.

The man shrugged.

"Who knows? It came in with a bale of scrap cloth from New York. I was a little curious about it myself, and called the market-master there to trace it. He says it was sold for scrap by a down-and-out Venusian who claimed he'd found it in a derelict ship floating around one of the asteroids. He didn't know what nationality the ship had been—a very early model, he said, probably one of the first space-ships, made before the identification symbols were adopted. I've wondered why he sold the thing for scrap. He could have got double the price, anyhow, if he'd made any effort."

"Funny." Smith stared down at the dizzy pattern writhing through the cloth in his hands. "Well, it's warm and light enough. If it doesn't drive me crazy trying to follow the pattern, I'll sleep warm at night."

He crumpled it in one hand, the whole six-foot square of it folding easily into his palm, and stuffed the silky bundle into his pocket—and thereupon forgot it until after his return to his quarters that evening.

He had taken one of the cubicle steel rooms in the great steel lodging-houses the Martian government offers for a very

nominal rent to transients. The original purpose was to house those motley hordes of spacemen that swarm every port city of the civilized planets, offering them accommodations cheap and satisfactory enough so that they will not seek the black byways of the town and there fall in with the denizens of the Martian underworld whose lawlessness is a byword among space sailors.

The great steel building that housed Smith and countless others was not entirely free from the influences of Martian byways, and if the police had actually searched the place with any degree of thoroughness a large percentage of its dwellers might have been transferred to the Emperor's prisons—Smith almost certainly among them, for his activities were rarely within the law and though he could not recall at the moment any particularly flagrant sins committed in Lakkdarol, a charge could certainly have been found against him by the most half-hearted searcher. However, the likelihood of a police raid was very remote, and Smith, as he went in under the steel portals of the great door, rubbed shoulders with smugglers and pirates and fugitives and sinners of all the sins that keep the spaceways thronged.

In his little cubicle he switched on the light and saw a dozen blurred replicas of himself, reflected dimly in the steel walls, spring into being with the sudden glow. In that curious company he moved forward to a chair and pulled out the crumpled shawl. Shaking it in the mirror-walled room produced a sudden wild writhing of scarlet patterns over walls and floor and ceiling, and for an instant the room whirled in an inexplicable kaleidoscope and he had the impression that the four-dimensional walls had opened suddenly to undreamed-of vastnesses where living scarlet in wild, unruly patterns shivered through the void.

Then in a moment the walls closed in again and the dim reflections quieted and became only the images of a tall, brown man with pale eyes, holding a curious shawl in his hands. There was a strange, sensuous pleasure in the clinging of the silky wool to his fingers, the lightness of it, the warmth. He spread it out on the table and traced the screaming scarlet pattern with his finger, trying to follow that one writhing line through the intricacies of its path, and the more he stared the more irritatingly clear it became to him that there must be a purpose in that whirl of color, that if he stared long enough, surely he must trace it out. . . .

When he slept that night he spread the bright shawl across his bed, and the brilliance of it colored his dreams fantastically. . . .

That threading scarlet was a labyrinthin path down which he stumbled blindly, and at every turn he looked back and saw himself in myriad replicas, always wandering lost and alone through the pattern of the path. Sometimes it shook itself under his feet, and whenever he thought he saw the end it would writhe into fresh intricacies. . . .

The sky was a great shawl threaded with scarlet lightning that shivered and squirmed as he watched, then wound itself into the familiar, dizzy pattern that became one mighty Word in a nameless writing, whose meaning he shuddered on the verge of understanding, and woke in icy terror just before the significance of it broke upon his brain. . . .

He slept again, and saw the shawl hanging in a blue dusk the color of its background, stared and stared until the square of it melted imperceptibly into the dimness and the scarlet was a pattern incised lividly upon a gate . . . a gate of strange

outline in a high wall, half seen through that curious, cloudy twilight blurred with exquisite patches of green and violet, so that it seemed no mortal twilight, but some strange and lovely evening in a land where the air was suffused with colored mists, and no winds blew. He felt himself moving forward, without effort, and the gate opened before him. . . .

He was mounting a long flight of steps. In one of the metamorphoses of dreams it did not surprize him that the gate had vanished, or that he had no remembrance of having climbed the long flight stretching away behind him. The lovely colored twilight still veiled the air, so that he could see but dimly the steps rising before him and melting into the mist.

And now, suddenly, he was aware of a stirring in the dimness, and a girl came flying down the stairs in headlong, stumbling terror. He could see the shadow of it on her face, and her long, bright-colored hair streamed out behind her, and from head to foot she was dabbled with blood. In her blind flight she must not have seen him, for she came plunging downward three steps at a time and blundered full into him as he stood undecided, watching. The impact all but unbalanced him, but his arms closed instinctively about her and for a moment she hung in his embrace, utterly spent, gasping against his broad leather breast and too breathless even to wonder who had stopped her. The smell of fresh blood rose to his nostrils from her dreadfully spattered garments.

Finally she lifted her head and raised a flushed, creamy-brown face to him, gulping in air through lips the color of holly berries. Her dabbled hair, so fantastically golden that it might have been almost orange, shivered about her as she clung to him with lifted, lovely face. In that dizzy moment he saw that her eyes were sherry-brown with tints of red, and the fantastic, colored beauty of her face had a wild tinge of something utterly at odds with anything he had ever known before. It might have been the look in her eyes. . . .

"Oh!" she gasped. "It—it has her! Let me go! . . . Let me——"

Smith shook her gently.

"What has her?" he demanded. "Who? Listen to me! You're covered with blood, do you know it? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head wildly.

"No—no—let me go! I must—not my blood—hers. . . ."

She sobbed on the last word, and suddenly collapsed in his arms, weeping with a violent intensity that shook her from head to foot. Smith gazed helplessly about over the orange head, then gathered the shaking girl in his arms and went on up the steps through the violet gloaming.

HE MUST have climbed for all of five minutes before the twilight thinned a little and he saw that the stairs ended at the head of a long hallway, high-arched like a cathedral aisle. A row of low doors ran down one side of the hall, and he turned aside at random into the nearest. It gave upon a gallery whose arches opened into blue space. A low bench ran along the wall under the gallery windows, and he crossed toward it, gently setting down the sobbing girl and supporting her against his shoulder.

"My sister," she wept. "It has her—oh, my sister!"

"Don't cry, don't cry," Smith heard his own voice saying, surprizingly. "It's all a dream, you know. Don't cry—there never was any sister—you don't exist at all—don't cry so."

She jerked her head up at that, startled out of her sobs for a moment, and stared at him with sherry-brown eyes drowned

in tears. Her lashes clung together in wet, starry points. She stared with searching eyes, taking in the leather-brownness of him, his spaceman's suit, his scarred dark face and eyes paler than steel. And then a look of infinite pity softened the strangeness of her face, and she said gently,

"Oh . . . you come from—from—you still believe that you dream!"

"I *know* I'm dreaming," persisted Smith childishly. "I'm lying asleep in Lakkdarol and dreaming of you, and all this, and when I wake——"

She shook her head sadly.

"You will never wake. You have come into a more deadly dream than you could ever guess. There is no waking from this land."

"What do you mean? Why not?" A little absurd panic was starting up in his mind at the sorrow and the pity in her voice, the sureness of her words. Yet this was one of those rare dreams wherein he knew quite definitely that he dreamed. He could not be mistaken. . . .

"There are many dream countries," she said, "many nebulous, unreal half-lands where the souls of sleepers wander, places that have an actual, tenuous existence, if one knows the way. . . . But here—it has happened before, you see—one may not blunder without passing a door that opens one way only. And he who has the key to open it may come through, but he can never find the way into his own waking land again. Tell me—what key opened the door to you?"

"The shawl," Smith murmured. "The shawl . . . of course. That damnable red pattern, dizzy——"

He passed a hand across his eyes, for the memory of it, writhing, alive, searingly scarlet, burned behind his eyelids.

"What was it?" she demanded, breathlessly, he thought, as if a half-hopeless eagerness forced the question from her lips. "Can you remember?"

"A red pattern," he said slowly, "a thread of bright scarlet woven into a blue shawl—nightmare pattern—painted on the gate I came by . . . but it's only a dream, of course. In a few minutes I'll wake. . . ."

She clutched his knee excitedly.

"Can you remember?" she demanded. "The pattern—the red pattern? The Word?"

"Word?" he wondered stupidly. "Word—in the sky? No—no, I don't want to remember—crazy pattern, you know. Can't forget it—but no, I couldn't tell you what it was, or trace it for you. Never was anything like it—thank God. It was on that shawl. . . ."

"Woven on a shawl," she murmured to herself. "Yes, of course. But how you ever came by it, in your world—when it—when *it*—oh!"

Memory of whatever tragedy had sent her flying down the stairs swept back in a flood, and her face crumpled into tears again. "My sister!"

"Tell me what happened." Smith woke from his daze at the sound of her sob. "Can't I help? Please let me try—tell me about it."

"My sister," she said faintly. "It caught her in the hall—caught her before my eyes—spattered me with her blood. Oh! . . ."

"It?" puzzled Smith. "What? Is there danger?" and his hand moved instinctively toward his gun.

She caught the gesture and smiled a little scornfully through her tears.

"It," she said. "The—the Thing. No gun can harm it, no man can fight it—It came, and that was all."

"But what is it? What does it look like? Is it near?"

"It's everywhere. One never knows—

until the mist begins to thicken and the pulse of red shows through—and then it's too late. We do not fight it, or think of it overmuch—life would be unbearable. For it hungers and must be fed, and we who feed it strive to live as happily as we may before the Thing comes for us. But one can never know."

"Where did it come from? What is it?"

"No one knows—it has always been here—always will be . . . too nebulous to die or be killed—a Thing out of some alien place we couldn't understand, I suppose—somewhere so long ago, or in some such unthinkable dimension that we will never have any knowledge of its origin. But as I say, we try not to think."

"If it eats flesh," said Smith stubbornly, "it must be vulnerable—and I have my gun."

"Try if you like," she shrugged. "Others have tried—and it still comes. It dwells here, we believe, if it dwells anywhere. We are—taken—more often in these halls than elsewhere. When you are weary of life you might bring your gun and wait under this roof. You may not have long to wait."

"I'm not ready to try the experiment just yet," Smith grinned. "If the Thing lives here, why do you come?"

She shrugged again, apathetically. "If we do not, it will come after us when it hungers. And we come here for—for our food." She shot him a curious glance from under lowered lids. "You wouldn't understand. But as you say, it's a dangerous place. We'd best go now—you will come with me, won't you? I shall be lonely, now." And her eyes brimmed again.

"Of course. I'm sorry, my dear. I'll do what I can for you—until I wake." He grinned at the fantastic sound of this.

"You will not wake," she said quietly. "Better not to hope, I think. You are trapped here with the rest of us and here you must stay until you die."

He rose and held out his hand.

"Let's go, then," he said. "Maybe you're right, but—well, come on."

SHE took his hand and jumped up. The orange hair, too fantastically colored for anything outside a dream, swung about her brilliantly. He saw now that she wore a single white garment, brief and belted, over the creamy brownness of her body. It was torn now, and hideously stained. She made a picture of strange and vivid loveliness, all white and gold and bloody, in the misted twilight of the gallery.

"Where are we going?" she asked Smith. "Out there?" And he nodded toward the blueness beyond the windows.

She drew her shoulders together in a little shudder of distaste.

"Oh, no," she said.

"What is it?"

"Listen." She took him by the arms and lifted a serious face to his. "If you must stay here—and you must, for there is only one way out save death, and that is a worse way even than dying—you must learn to ask no questions about the—the Temple. This is the Temple. Here it dwells. Here we—feed.

"There are halls we know, and we keep to them. It is wiser. You saved my life when you stopped me on those stairs—no one has ever gone down into that mist and darkness, and returned. I should have known, seeing you climb them, that you were not of us . . . for whatever lies beyond, wherever that stairway leads—it is better not to know. It is better not to look out the windows of this place. We have learned that, too. For from the outside the Temple looks strange enough, but from the inside, looking out, one is

liable to see things it is better not to see. . . . What that blue space is, on which this gallery opens, I do not know—I have no wish to know. There are windows here opening on stranger things than this—but we turn our eyes away when we pass them. You will learn. . . ."

She took his hand, smiling a little.

"Come with me, now."

And in silence they left the gallery opening on space and went down the hall where the blue mist floated so beautifully with its clouds of violet and green confusing the eye, and a great stillness all about.

THE hallway led straight, as nearly as he could see, for the floating clouds veiled it, toward the great portals of the Temple. In the form of a mighty triple arch it opened out of the clouded twilight upon a shining day like no day he had ever seen on any planet. The light came from no visible source, and there was a lucid quality about it, nebulous but unmistakable, as if one were looking through the depths of a crystal, or through clear water that trembled a little now and then. It was diffused through the translucent day from a sky as shining and unfamiliar as everything else in this amazing dreamland.

They stood under the great arch of the Temple, looking out over the shining land beyond. Afterward he could never quite remember what had made it so unutterably strange, so indefinably dreadful. There were trees, feathery masses of green and bronze above the bronze-green grass; the bright air shimmered, and through the leaves he caught the glimmer of water not far away. At first glance it seemed a perfectly normal scene—yet tiny details caught his eye that sent ripples of coldness down his back. The grass, for instance. . . .

When they stepped down upon it and began to cross the meadow toward the trees beyond which water gleamed, he saw that the blades were short and soft as fur, and they seemed to cling to his companion's bare feet as she walked. As he looked out over the meadow he saw that long waves of it, from every direction, were rippling toward them as if the wind blew from all sides at once toward the common center that was themselves. Yet no wind blew.

"It—it's alive," he stammered, startled. "The grass!"

"Yes, of course," she said indifferently.

And then he realized that though the feathery fronds of the trees waved now and then, gracefully together, there was no wind. And they did not sway in one direction only, but by twos and threes in many ways, dipping and rising with a secret, contained life of their own.

When they reached the belt of woodland he looked up curiously and heard the whisper and rustle of leaves above him, bending down as if in curiosity as the two passed beneath. They never bent far enough to touch them, but a sinister air of watchfulness, of aliveness, brooded over the whole uncannily alive landscape, and the ripples of the grass followed them wherever they went.

The lake, like that twilight in the Temple, was a sleepy blue clouded with violet and green, not like real water, for the colored blurs did not diffuse or change as it rippled.

On the shore, a little above the water line, stood a tiny, shrine-like building of some creamy stone, its walls no more than a series of arches open to the blue, translucent day. The girl led him to the doorway and gestured within negligently.

"I live here," she said.

Smith stared. It was quite empty save for two low couches with a blue coverlet

thrown across each. Very classic it looked, with its whiteness and austerity, the arches opening on a vista of woodland and grass beyond.

"Doesn't it ever get cold?" he asked. "Where do you eat? Where are your books and food and clothes?"

"I have some spare tunics under my couch," she said. "That's all. No books, no other clothing, no food. We feed at the Temple. And it is never any colder or warmer than this."

"But what do you do?"

"Do? Oh, swim in the lake, sleep and rest and wander through the woods. Time passes very quickly."

"Idyllic," murmured Smith, "but rather tiresome, I should think."

"When one knows," she said, "that the next moment may be one's last, life is savored to the full. One stretches the hours out as long as possible. No, for us it is not tiresome."

"But have you no cities? Where are the other people?"

"It is best not to collect in crowds. Somehow they seem to draw—it. We live in twos and threes — sometimes alone. We have no cities. We do nothing—what purpose in beginning anything when we know we shall not live to end it? Why even think too long of one thing? Come down to the lake."

She took his hand and led him across the clinging grass to the sandy brink of the water, and they sank in silence on the narrow beach. Smith looked out over the lake where vague colors misted the blue, trying not to think of the fantastic things that were happening to him. Indeed, it was hard to do much thinking, here, in the midst of the blueness and the silence, the very air dreamy about them . . . the cloudy water lapping the shore with tiny, soft sounds like the breathing of a sleeper. The place was heavy with the stillness and the dreamy colors, and Smith was never sure, afterward, whether in his dream he did not sleep for a while; for presently he heard a stir at his side and the girl reseated herself, clad in a fresh tunic, all the blood washed away. He could not remember her having left, but it did not trouble him.

The light had for some time been sinking and blurring, and imperceptibly a cloudy blue twilight closed about them, seeming somehow to rise from the blurring lake, for it partook of that same dreamy blueness clouded with vague colors. Smith thought that he would be content never to rise again from that cool sand, to sit here for ever in the blurring twilight and the silence of his dream. How long he did sit there he never knew. The blue peace enfolded him utterly, until he was steeped in its misty evening colors and permeated through and through with the tranced quiet.

The darkness had deepened until he could no longer see any more than the nearest wavelets lapping the sand. Beyond, and all about, the dream-world melted into the violet-misted blueness of the twilight. He was not aware that he had turned his head, but presently he found himself looking down on the girl beside him. She was lying on the pale sand, her hair a fan of darkness to frame the pallor of her face. In the twilight her mouth was dark too, and from the darkness under her lashes he slowly became aware that she was watching him unwinkingly.

For a long while he sat there, gazing down, meeting the half-hooded eyes in silence. And presently, with the effortless detachment of one who moves in a dream, he bent down to meet her lifting arms. The sand was cool and sweet, and her mouth tasted faintly of blood.

2

THERE was no sunrise in that land. Lucid day brightened slowly over the breathing landscape, and grass and trees stirred with wakening awareness, rather horribly in the beauty of the morning. When Smith woke, he saw the girl coming up from the lake, shaking blue water from her orange hair. Blue droplets clung to the creaminess of her skin, and she was laughing and flushed from head to foot in the glowing dawn.

Smith sat up on his couch and pushed back the blue coverlet.

"I'm hungry," he said. "When and what do we eat?"

The laughter vanished from her face in a breath. She gave her hair a troubled shake and said doubtfully,

"Hungry?"

"Yes, starved! Didn't you say you get your food at the Temple? Let's go up there."

She sent him a sidelong, enigmatic glance from under her lashes as she turned aside.

"Very well," she said.

"Anything wrong?" He reached out as she passed and pulled her to his knee, kissing the troubled mouth lightly. And again he tasted blood.

"Oh, no." She ruffled his hair and rose. "I'll be ready in a moment, and then we'll go."

And so again they passed the belt of woods where the trees bent down to watch, and crossed the rippling grassland. From all directions long waves of it came blowing toward them as before, and the fur-like blades clung to their feet. Smith tried not to notice. Everywhere, he was seeing this morning, an undercurrent of nameless unpleasantness ran beneath the surface of this lovely land.

As they crossed the live grass a memory suddenly returned to him, and he said, "What did you mean, yesterday, when you said that there was a way—out—other than death?"

She did not meet his eyes as she answered, in that troubled voice, "Worse than dying, I said. A way out we do not speak of here."

"But if there's any way at all, I must know of it," he persisted. "Tell me."

She swept the orange hair like a veil between them, bending her head and saying indistinctly, "A way out you could not take. A way too costly. And—and I do not wish you to go, now. . . ."

"I must know," said Smith relentlessly.

She paused then, and stood looking up at him, her sherry-colored eyes disturbed.

"By the way you came," she said at last. "By virtue of the Word. But that gate is impassable."

"Why?"

"It is death to pronounce the Word. Literally. I do not know it now, could not speak it if I would. But in the Temple there is one room where the Word is graven in scarlet on the wall, and its power is so great that the echoes of it ring for ever round and round that room. If one stands before the graven symbol and lets the force of it beat upon his brain he will hear, and know—and shriek the awful syllables aloud—and so die. It is a word from some tongue so alien to all our being that the spoken sound of it, echoing in the throat of a living man, is disrupting enough to rip the very fibers of the human body apart—to blast its atoms asunder, to destroy body and mind as utterly as if they had never been. And because the sound is so disruptive it somehow blasts open for an instant the door between your world and mine. But the danger is dreadful, for it may open the door to other worlds too, and let things through more terrible than we can dream of. Some say it was thus that the Thing

gained access to our land eons ago. And if you are not standing exactly where the door opens, on the one spot in the room that is protected, as the center of a whirlwind is quiet, and if you do not pass instantly out of the sound of the Word, it will blast you asunder as it does the one who has pronounced it for you. So you see how impos——" Here she broke off with a little scream and glanced down in half-laughing annoyance, then took two or three little running steps and turned.

"The grass," she explained ruefully, pointing to her feet. The brown bareness of them was dotted with scores of tiny blood-spots. "If one stands too long in one place, barefoot, it will pierce the skin and drink—stupid of me to forget. But come."

SMITH went on at her side, looking round with new eyes upon the lovely, pellucid land, too beautiful and frightening for anything outside a dream. All about them the hungry grass came hurrying in long, converging waves as they advanced. Were the trees, then, flesh-eating too? Cannibal trees and vampire grass—he shuddered a little and looked ahead.

The Temple stood tall before them, a building of some nameless material as mistily blue as far-off mountains on the Earth. The mistiness did not condense or clarify as they approached, and the outlines of the place were mysteriously hard to fix in mind—he could never understand, afterward, just why. When he tried too hard to concentrate on one particular corner or tower or window it blurred before his eyes as if the focus were at fault—as if the whole strange, veiled building stood just on the borderland of another dimension.

From the immense triple arch of the doorway, as they approached—a triple arch like nothing he had ever seen before, so irritatingly hard to focus upon that he could not be sure just wherein its difference lay—a pale blue mist issued smokily. And when they stepped within they walked into that twilight dimness he was coming to know so well.

The great hall lay straight and veiled before them, but after a few steps the girl drew him aside and under another archway, into a long gallery through whose drifting haze he could see rows of men and women kneeling against the wall with bowed heads, as if in prayer. She led him down the line to the end, and he saw then that they knelt before small spigots curving up from the wall at regular intervals. She dropped to her knees before one and, motioning him to follow, bent her head and laid her lips to the up-curved spout. Dubiously he followed her example.

Instantly with the touch of his mouth on the nameless substance of the spigot something hot and, strangely, at once salty and sweet flowed into his mouth. There was an acridity about it that gave a curious tang, and the more he drank the more avid he became. Hauntingly delicious it was, and warmth flowed through him more strongly with every draft. Yet somewhere deep within him memory stirred unpleasantly . . . somewhere, somehow, he had known this hot, acrid, salty taste before, and — suddenly suspicions struck him like a bludgeon, and he jerked his lips from the spout as if it burnt. A tiny thread of scarlet trickled from the wall. He passed the back of one hand across his lips and brought it away red. He knew that odor, then.

The girl knelt beside him with closed eyes, rapt avidity in every line of her. When he seized her shoulder she twitched away and opened protesting eyes, but did not lift her lips from the spigot. Smith gestured violently, and with one last long

draft she rose and turned a half-angry face to his, but laid a finger on her reddened lips.

He followed her in silence past the kneeling lines again. When they reached the hall outside he swung upon her and gripped her shoulders angrily.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Her eyes slid away. She shrugged.

"What were you expecting? We feed as we must, here. You'll learn to drink without a qualm—if it does not come for you too soon."

A moment longer he stared angrily down into her evasive, strangely lovely face. Then he turned without a word and strode down the hallway through the drifting mists toward the door. He heard her bare feet pattering along behind hurriedly, but he did not look back. Not until he had come out into the glowing day and half crossed the grasslands did he relent enough to glance around. She paced at his heels with bowed head, the orange hair swinging about her face and unhappiness eloquent in every motion. The submission of her touched him suddenly, and he paused for her to catch up, smiling down half reluctantly on the bent orange head.

She lifted a tragic face to his, and there were tears in the sherry eyes. So he had no choice but to laugh and lift her up against his leather-clad breast and kiss the drooping mouth into smiles again. But he understood, now, the faintly acrid bitterness of her kisses.

"Still," he said, when they had reached the little white shrine among the trees, "there must be some other food than—that. Does no grain grow? Isn't there any wild life in the woods? Haven't the trees fruit?"

She gave him another sidelong look from under dropped lashes, warily.

"No," she said. "Nothing but the grass grows here. No living thing dwells in this land but man—and it. And as for the fruit of the trees—give thanks that they bloom but once in a lifetime."

"Why?"

"Better not to—speak of it," she said.

The phrase, the constant evasion, was beginning to wear on Smith's nerves. He said nothing of it then, but he turned from her and went down to the beach, dropping to the sand and striving to recapture last night's languor and peace. His hunger was curiously satisfied, even from the few swallows he had taken, and gradually the drowsy content of the day before began to flow over him in deepening waves. After all, it was a lovely land. . . .

That day drew dreamily to a close, and darkness rose in a mist from the misty lake, and he came to find in kisses that tasted of blood a certain tang that but pointed their sweetness. And in the morning he woke to the slowly brightening day, swam with the girl in the blue, tingling waters of the lake—and reluctantly went up through the woods and across the ravenous grass to the Temple, driven by a hunger greater than his repugnance. He went up with a slight nausea rising within him, and yet strangely eager. . . .

Once more the Temple rose veiled and indefinite under the glowing sky, and once more he plunged into the eternal twilight of its corridors, turned aside as one who knows the way, knelt of his own accord in the line of drinkers along the wall. . . .

With the first draft that nausea rose within him almost overwhelmingly, but when the warmth of the drink had spread through him the nausea died and nothing was left but hunger and eagerness, and he drank blindly until the girl's hand on his shoulder roused him.

A sort of intoxication had wakened within him with the burning of that hot, salt drink in his veins, and he went back across the hurrying grass in a half-daze. Through most of the pellucid day it lasted, and the slow dark was rising from the lake before clearness returned to him.

3

And so life resolved itself into a very simple thing. The days glowed by and the blurred darknesses came and went. Life held little any more but the bright clarity of the day and the dimness of the dark, morning journeys to drink at the Temple fountain and the bitter kisses of the girl with the orange hair. Time had ceased for him. Slow day followed slow day, and the same round of living circled over and over, and the only change —perhaps he did not see it then—was the deepening look in the girl's eyes when they rested upon him, her growing silences.

One evening just as the first faint dimness was clouding the air, and the lake smoked hazily, he happened to glance off across its surface and thought he saw through the rising mists the outline of very far mountains, and he asked curiously,

"What lies beyond the lake? Aren't those mountains over there?"

The girl turned her head quickly and her sherry-brown eyes darkened with something like dread.

"I don't know," she said. "We believe it best not to wonder what lies—beyond."

And suddenly Smith's irritation with the old evasions woke and he said violently,

"Damn your beliefs! I'm sick of that answer to every question I ask! Don't you ever wonder about anything? Are you all so thoroughly cowed by this dread of something unseen that every spark of your spirit is dead?"

She turned the sorrowful, sherry gaze upon him.

"We learn by experience," she said. "Those who wonder—those who investigate—die. We live in a land alive with danger, incomprehensible, intangible, terrible. Life is bearable only if we do not look too closely—only if we accept conditions and make the most of them. You must not ask questions if you would live.

"As for the mountains beyond, and all the unknown country that lies over the horizons—they are as unreachable as a mirage. For in a land where no food grows, where we must visit the Temple daily or starve, how could an explorer provision himself for a journey? No, we are bound here by unbreakable bonds, and we must live here until we die."

Smith shrugged. The languor of the evening was coming upon him, and the brief flare of irritation had died as swiftly as it rose.

Yet from that outburst dated the beginning of his discontent. Somehow, despite the lovely languor of the place, despite the sweet bitterness of the Temple fountains and the sweeter bitterness of the kisses that were his for the asking, he could not drive from his mind the vision of those far mountains veiled in rising haze. Unrest had wakened within him, and like some sleeper arising from a lotus-dream his mind turned more and more frequently to the desire for action, adventure, some other use for his danger-hardened body than the exigencies of sleep and food and love.

On all sides stretched the moving, restless woods, farther than the eye could reach. The grasslands rippled, and over the dim horizon the far mountains beckoned him. Even the mystery of the Temple and its endless twilight began to

torment his waking moments. He dallied with the idea of exploring those hallways which the dwellers in this lotus-land avoided, of gazing from the strange windows that opened upon inexplicable blue. Surely life, even here, must hold some more fervent meaning than that he followed now. What lay beyond the wood and grasslands? What mysterious country did those mountains wall?

He began to harry his companion with questions that woke more and more often the look of dread behind her eyes, but he gained little satisfaction. She belonged to a people without history, without ambition, their lives bent wholly toward wringing from each moment its full sweetness in anticipation of the terror to come. Evasion was the keynote of their existence, perhaps with reason. Perhaps all the adventurous spirits among them had followed their curiosity into danger and death, and the only ones left were the submissive souls who led their bucolically voluptuous lives in this Elysium so shadowed with horror.

In this colored lotus-land, memories of the world he had left grew upon him more and more vividly: he remembered the hurrying crowds of the planets' capitals, the lights, the noise, the laughter. He saw space-ships cleaving the night sky with flame, flashing from world to world through the star-flecked darkness. He remembered sudden brawls in saloons and space-sailor dives when the air was alive with shouts and tumult, and heat-guns slashed their blue-hot blades of flame and the smell of burnt flesh hung heavy. Life marched in pageant past his remembering eyes, violent, vivid, shoulder to shoulder with death. And nostalgia wrenched at him for the lovely, terrible, brawling worlds he had left behind.

Daily the unrest grew upon him. The girl made pathetic little attempts to find some sort of entertainment that would occupy his ranging mind. She led him on timid excursions into the living woods, even conquered her horror of the Temple enough to follow him on timorous tiptoe as he explored a little way down the corridors which did not arouse in her too anguished a terror. But she must have known from the first that it was hopeless.

ONE day as they lay on the sand watching the lake ripple bluely under a crystal sky, Smith's eyes, dwelling on the faint shadow of the mountains, half unseeingly, suddenly narrowed into a hardness as bright and pale as steel. Muscle ridged his abruptly set jaw and he sat upright with a jerk, pushing away the girl who had been leaning on his shoulder.

"I'm through," he said harshly, and rose.

"What—what is it?" The girl stumbled to her feet.

"I'm going away—anywhere. To those mountains, I think. I'm leaving now!"

"But—you wish to die, then?"

"Better the real thing than a living death like this," he said. "At least I'll have a little more excitement first."

"But, what of your food? There's nothing to keep you alive, even if you escape the greater dangers. Why, you'll dare not even lie down on the grass at night—it would eat you alive! You have no chance at all to live if you leave this grove—and me."

"If I must die, I shall," he said. "I've been thinking it over, and I've made up my mind. I could explore the Temple and so come on *it* and die. But do *something* I must, and it seems to me my best chance is in trying to reach some country where food grows before I starve. It's worth trying. I can't go on like this."

She looked at him miserably, tears brimming her sherry eyes. He opened his

mouth to speak, but before he could say a word her eyes strayed beyond his shoulder and suddenly she smiled, a dreadful, frozen little smile.

"You will not go," she said. "Death has come for us now."

She said it so calmly, so unafraid that he did not understand until she pointed beyond him. He turned.

The air between them and the shrine was curiously agitated. As he watched, it began to resolve itself into a nebulous blue mist that thickened and darkened . . . blurry tinges of violet and green began to blow through it vaguely, and then by imperceptible degrees a flush of rose appeared in the mist — deepened, thickened, contracted into burning scarlet that seared his eyes, pulsed alively—and he knew that it had come.

An aura of menace seemed to radiate from it, strengthening as the mist strengthened, reaching out in hunger toward his mind. He felt it as tangibly as he saw it—cloudy danger reaching out avidly for them both.

The girl was not afraid. Somehow he knew this, though he dared not turn, dared not wrench his eyes from that hypnotically pulsing scarlet. . . . She whispered very softly from behind him,

"So I die with you, I am content." And the sound of her voice freed him from the snare of the crimson pulse.

He barked a wolfish laugh, abruptly—welcoming even this diversion from the eternal idyl he had been living—and the gun leaping to his hand spurted a long blue flame so instantly that the girl behind him caught her breath. The steel-blue dazzle illumined the gathering mist lividly, passed through it without obstruction and charred the ground beyond. Smith set his teeth and swung a figure-eight pattern of flame through and through the mist, lacing it with blue heat. And when that finger of fire crossed the scarlet pulse the impact jarred the whole nebulous cloud violently, so that its outlines wavered and shrank, and the pulse of crimson sizzled under the heat—shriveled —began to fade in desperate haste.

Smith swept the ray back and forth along the redness, tracing its pattern with destruction, but it faded too swiftly for him. In little more than an instant it had paled and disembodied and vanished save for a fading flush of rose, and the blue-hot blade of his flame sizzled harmlessly through the disappearing mist to sear the ground beyond. He switched off the heat, then, and stood breathing a little unevenly as the death-cloud thinned and paled and vanished before his eyes, until no trace of it was left and the air glowed lucid and transparent once more.

The unmistakable odor of burning flesh caught at his nostrils, and he wondered for a moment if the Thing had indeed materialized a nucleus of matter, and then he saw that the smell came from the seared grass his flame had struck. The tiny, furry blades were all writhing away from the burnt spot, straining at their roots as if a wind blew them back, and from the blackened area a thick smoke rose, reeking with the odor of burnt meat. Smith, remembering their vampire habits, turned away, half nauseated.

The girl had sunk to the sand behind him, trembling violently now that the danger was gone.

"Is—it dead?" she breathed, when she could master her quivering mouth.

"I don't know. No way of telling. Probably not."

"What will—will you do now?"

He slid the heat-gun back into its holster and settled the belt purposefully.

"What I started out to do."

The girl scrambled up in desperate haste.

"Wait!" she gasped, "wait!" and clutched at his arm to steady herself. And he waited until the trembling had passed. Then she went on, "Come up to the Temple once more before you go."

"All right. Not a bad idea. It may be a long time before my next—meal."

And so again they crossed the fur-soft grass that bore down upon them in long ripples from every part of the meadow.

THE Temple rose dim and unreal before them, and as they entered blue twilight folded them dreamily about. Smith turned by habit toward the gallery of the drinkers, but the girl laid upon his arm a hand that shook a little, and murmured,

"Come this way."

He followed in growing surprize down the hallway through the drifting mists and away from the gallery he knew so well. It seemed to him that the mist thickened as they advanced, and in the uncertain light he could never be sure that the walls did not waver as nebulously as the blurring air. He felt a curious impulse to step through their intangible barriers and out of the hall into—what?

Presently steps rose under his feet, almost imperceptibly, and after a while the pressure on his arm drew him aside. They went in under a low, heavy arch of stone and entered the strangest room he had ever seen. It appeared to be seven-sided, as nearly as he could judge through the drifting mist, and curious, converging lines were graven deep in the floor.

It seemed to him that forces outside his comprehension were beating violently against the seven walls, circling like hurricanes through the dimness until the whole room was a maelstrom of invisible tumult.

When he lifted his eyes to the wall, he knew where he was. Blazoned on the dim stone, burning through the twilight like some other-dimensional fire, the scarlet pattern writhed across the wall.

The sight of it, somehow, set up a commotion in his brain, and it was with whirling head and stumbling feet that he answered to the pressure on his arm. Dimly he realized that he stood at the very center of those strange, converging lines, feeling forces beyond reason coursing through him along paths outside any knowledge he possessed.

Then for one moment arms clasped his neck and a warm, fragrant body pressed against him, and a voice sobbed in his ear,

"If you must leave me, then go back through the Door, beloved—life without you—more dreadful even than a death like this. . . ." A kiss that stung of blood clung to his lips for an instant; then the clasp loosened and he stood alone.

Through the twilight he saw her dimly outlined against the Word. And he thought, as she stood there, that it was as if the invisible currents beat bodily against her, so that she swayed and wavered before him, her outlines blurring and forming again as the forces from which he was so mystically protected buffeted her mercilessly.

And he saw knowledge dawning terribly upon her face, as the meaning of the Word seeped slowly into her mind. The sweet brown face twisted hideously, the blood-red lips writhed apart to shriek a Word—in a moment of clarity he actually saw her tongue twisting incredibly to form the syllables of the unspeakable thing never meant for human lips to frame. Her mouth opened into an impossible shape . . . she gasped in the blurry mist and shrieked aloud. . . .

4

SMITH was walking along a twisting path so scarlet that he could not bear to look down, a path that wound and unwound and shook itself under his feet so that he stumbled at every step. He was groping through a blinding mist clouded with violet and green, and in his ears a dreadful whisper rang—the first syllable of an unutterable Word. . . . Whenever he neared the end of the path it shook itself under him and doubled back, and weariness like a drug was sinking into his brain, and the sleepy twilight colors of the mist lulled him, and——

"He's waking up!" said an exultant voice in his ear.

Smith lifted heavy eyelids upon a room without walls—a room wherein multiple figures extending into infinity moved to and fro in countless hosts. . . .

"Smith! N. W.! Wake up!" urged that familiar voice from somewhere near.

He blinked. The myriad diminishing figures resolved themselves into the reflections of two men in a steel-walled room, bending over him. The friendly, anxious face of his partner, Yarol the Venusian, leaned above the bed.

"By Pharol, N. W.," said the well-remembered, ribald voice, "you've been asleep for a week! We thought you'd never come out of it—must have been an awful brand of whisky!"

Smith managed a feeble grin—amazing how weak he felt—and turned an inquiring gaze upon the other figure.

"I'm a doctor," said that individual, meeting the questing stare. "Your friend called me in three days ago and I've been working on you ever since. It must have been all of five or six days since you fell into this coma—have you any idea what caused it?"

Smith's pale eyes roved the room. He did not find what he sought, and though his weak murmur answered the doctor's question, the man was never to know it.

"Shawl?"

"I threw the damned thing away," confessed Yarol. "Stood it for three days and then gave up. That red pattern gave me the worst headache I've had since we found that case of black wine on the asteroid. Remember?"

"Where——?"

"Gave it to a space-rat checking out for Venus. Sorry. Did you really want it? I'll buy you another."

Smith did not answer. The weakness was rushing up about him in gray waves. He closed his eyes, hearing the echoes of that first dreadful syllable whispering through his head . . . whisper from a dream. . . . Yarol heard him murmur softly,

"And — I never even knew — her name. . . ."

The Satanic Piano

By CARL JACOBI

"Farber!" I cried. "Farber! If you harm that girl——"

A gripping tale of occult evil and a marvelous musical invention—by the author of "Revelations in Black"

MIDNIGHT, and I was seated at the old concert grand in my study, running my fingers over the keys to the wild melody of Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*. Outside the fog like some toothless centenarian peered in at the glowing electroliers and drooled mist and greenish drizzle on the windowpanes. Hollow and muffled through the thick air, Big Ben boomed its chimes of the hour.

I was restless. The night was hardly conducive to sleep. The empty weeks in London with Martha, my fiancée, gone for an extended visit up-country, had reached a climax of loneliness in the

preceding solitary hours at the theater. And above all, that puzzling message which had come to my door a few moments past still lay there on the chair, leering up at me with the insistence of a spoken command. It read:

> Come at once to 94 Milford Lane. I have something of the utmost importance to show you. It concerns your music.
>
> WILSON FARBER.

For a moment as I stared down upon the black card with the peculiar writing in white ink, I was almost inclined to smile. Farber, eh? Wilson Farber. Yes, I remembered the man, remembered the day I had first come upon him in his dirty little music shop on lower Telling Street. I had gone there in search of some old collection of Russian folk-dances, and he, sitting amid his jumble of tarnished horns and battered violins, had led me into a conversation. And I remembered his book, which had attracted such wide interest and which psychology professors had been forced to admit opened new fields for thought in the subjects of hypnotism and telepathy.

Once again after that I had visited his shop, and while I must confess I was distinctly impressed by the man's queer erudition, still I had been only too glad to remove myself from his presence. There was something disturbing about the way he stared into your eyes, seemed to plumb your very soul. Nor did I like the silent way he glided about dragging his thick ebony cane, or that high-pitched laugh that sounded like the mirthless squeak of a ventriloquist.

Tall and gaunt, with a shock of sable black hair and a ragged unkempt beard the color of slate, he was at once a commanding and repelling figure. There were rumors about the man, rumors that came into existence when his unorthodox book first appeared in the stalls. Was it the work of a trained or a neurotic brain? And was there any significance in the fact that a *James Wilson Farber* had been released from St. Mary's Institution for the Insane some nine months before?

I say now that had that last line, "it concerns your music," not been included in the missive, I should probably have dismissed the matter entirely from my mind. But the thought stole upon me that perhaps back in the shadows of his shop he had come upon some rare old music composition and was offering it for sale. Farber knew my weakness. He knew that for years I have amused myself by collecting original manuscripts and unknown works of forgotten composers. This hobby has brought me almost as much enjoyment as my own creations for the piano, and I hated to let any valuable work slip through my fingers.

Yet even music compositions were not so important but that they could wait until the morrow. One did not go on midnight excursions merely for the sake of viewing some rhapsodic creation of yesteryear.

I moved to my favorite armchair, picked up a half-read novel and tried to immerse myself in the pages. For a time the movements of the characters attracted my full attention, and the disturbing message of Farber faded slowly out of my thoughts. But when in the course of a quarter-hour or so the narrative before me began to lag, I found my eyes inadvertently returning to the bit of paper there on the chair.

For the third time I crossed over and read its imperative lines, stood there musing, hands thrust deep in the pockets of my lounging-robe. And suddenly the old germ, curiosity, struck me with full force, and I gave in to impulse.

Five minutes later, clad in trench-coat and cap, I was rolling across the wet

streets in an east-bound cab, past Piccadilly Circus, down Haymarket and through a world of white to the Strand. The fog was even thicker here by the Embankment, and it seemed to increase as we sped onward.

MILFORD LANE was almost a half-hour's drive from my apartment. It was close to one o'clock by my watch when I stood before the frowning door of number 94, and by the light of a single street lamp, gazed upon the gigantic jumble of brick and wrought iron that formed the ancient edifice. For a moment I hesitated there, the fog and drizzle pressing close against my face like wet gauze, the rumble of a distant tram reaching my ears hollowly as if from some lower world. Then, urged on by curiosity and determined to see it all now that I had come this far, I stepped forward and rattled the knocker.

The sounds had but died away into silence when the door opened, and I found myself staring once again into the iron countenance of Wilson Farber. Even though I had known fully what to expect, I confess I recoiled slightly before those black penetrating eyes and that face white as lime.

"You sent for me——?" I began.

He nodded. "I'm glad you've come, Bancroft. I think you'll find it well worth your trouble. This way, please."

He conducted me through a dark corridor to a brilliantly lighted room in the rear of the house, thrust forward a chair, and bade me sit down. Slowly unbuttoning my coat, I glanced at my surroundings. Glanced, I say—then stared. Without fear of contradiction, I believe I can safely put down that room to be the strangest chamber in all London.

The four walls had been painted or frescoed a dead white, and over this in deep black, beginning from the ceiling and continuing down to the very floor, were a series of five lines of the musical scale, adorned with notes—full notes, half notes, and flagged eighths and sixteenths. At two-foot intervals on the wall, with no show of artistic placement, hung a line of musical instruments, the choice of which seemed to have been guided by a bizarre taste rather than a love for harmony. There were several lutes, battered and ornate, an oboe, a mandolin, a Javanese drum, and a number of queer elongated horns. Over in a far corner stood a harpsichord, dating to an early period. Heavy black drapes curtained the two windows, and in sharp contrast a white porcelain operating-table stood under the glare of a green-shaded lamp in the center of the room.

There was a desk at my side, the top littered with manuscript, chemical vials and tubes, and a disorderly array of books. Some of the volumes, I saw by the titles, were technical studies of music composers and their various works, but the majority dealt with such subjects as hypnotism, experiments of Doctor Mesmer and telepathy.

Farber was leaning forward now, placing before me a glass and a decanter, and motioning that I help myself.

I shook my head. "It's late," I said, "and I live a long way from here. What do you want with me?"

He settled in his chair, hooked his thumbs in the vest of his black suit and studied me closely.

"Bancroft," he said, beginning slowly in a quiet voice, "you're a concert pianist and a composer. Are you not?"

I looked at him carefully before I made my answer. There was power in that face. Every line suggested cruel determination as if once he were moving toward an end, nothing could stop him.

The mouth with its thin bluish lips was fixed in that characteristic half smile, half sneer. The eyes under their heavy brows gleamed like separate entities.

"I suppose you might call me that," I replied. "My public appearances have been a source of livelihood for some years now. But although I've written a lot, only one number of mine ever acquired much notice."

He nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "*Satanic Dance.* It has been acclaimed one of the finest examples of modern music in the last decade. And at present you are working on a sonata which you plan to present at your next concert at Kensington Hall."

I started in my chair. "Will you kindly tell me where you obtained that information?" I inquired coldly. "That sonata was to come as a complete surprize."

With a gesture of his hand he waved my question aside. "That is beside the point," he said. "I am in possession of a number of facts this blundering world will some day be surprized to learn about. When the time comes . . . but never mind. What I want to know now is this: What, exactly, is your method of composing music?"

"Method?" I repeated.

"Yes. For example, how did you go about writing *Satanic Dance?* What was your procedure?"

The question was so prosaic, so matter of fact, that I leaned back in disappointment. To be drawn out of one's apartment at such an hour, led to a distant point of the city, and then amid such surroundings, asked a simple detail about my bread-earning profession—as I have rationally come to look upon it—was indeed disillusioning. The tone of my voice manifested my lack of enthusiasm.

"Basically speaking," I replied, "the composing of music is no different from the writing of, well . . . say fiction. Half inspiration, half craftsmanship, I suppose. A central theme, a strain of melody courses through my mind. I immediately go to the piano, play as much of it as I can—play it several times, in fact—and then put the proper notes as far as my memory permits, on paper. Is that what you mean?"

The thin lips twisted into a smirk of satisfaction. "Yes," he said. "And what do you find to be your greatest difficulties in this method?"

"That," I replied, "is obvious. In transposing from the mind to the keys of the piano, and then to the printed notes on the page, much of the original inspiration is lost. It can not be otherwise. The realization is never so great as the expectation."

HE REACHED for the decanter, poured himself a glassful, sipped it slowly and moved to the edge of his chair.

"Suppose," he said, a distant expression stealing across his face, "suppose an instrument were to be placed at your disposal—a machine, let us call it—which under certain conditions would seize this musical inspiration that courses through your brain and transform it of its own accord into the actual living sound, a device so delicate that it would record permanently, note for note, the very melody that exists in your thoughts. How valuable do you think it would be?"

I dropped my cap on the floor and stared at him. For a moment as I gazed I seemed to be falling far into the depths of those liquid eyes. The black-bearded, sharp-featured face and its chalky skin, so white it appeared devoid of human blood, fixed itself like an optic scar directly before me, and the walls of the room with their maelstrom of painted

notes drifted far back out of the perspective. Slowly, for no reason I could understand, a great dread rose up within me. A chill crawled its way along my spine, and I jerked away with an effort.

"If such an instrument could be created," I said slowly, "it would bring fame to its musical owner in twenty-four hours. It would make a mere writer of songs a master musician, and it would make a great musician a genius. But it's impossible. I know something of science, and I know that telepathy—if that's what you're driving at—has never been acknowledged. Oh, I'm aware there are so-called mind-reading machines in use in criminal courts, but they are mere lie-detectors and show only the presence or absence of emotion. Still, it's rather interesting to dream about."

He seized my last words in fury. "Dream about!" he cried, banging his fist sharply on the arm of the chair. "That's all this stupid world does do. Fools, when will they realize they can not arrive at perfection through cold science alone? When will they learn they must include the psychic in their formula? You say, as they all have said, that such a machine is impossible. You say it can not be done. I will prove to you that you are wrong. Sit where you are!"

He leaped to his feet, stepped to the door leading to the adjoining room and disappeared. Profound silence swept down upon me as I found myself alone with those fantastic furnishings. For a moment I sat there absently twisting and turning one of the buttons of my coat. What on earth was this Farber person driving at? What was the significance of all the conversation regarding the composition of music? And why had I of all people been summoned here to be a party to it? As my wrist-watch ticked off the passing seconds, a mounting sense of uneasiness welled up within me, and I found myself staring at the music lines and note decorations until they seemed to swirl wildly and form queer designs on the walls.

At length, impatiently, I stepped across to one of the heavily curtained windows at the far side of the room, thrust the drapes aside and peered out into the pool of drifting fog. But my vision was interrupted. Heavy iron bars were there, defiant as a bastille, preventing access either to or from the street. A wild sudden thought that I might be a prisoner here whipped me about. The sight of the open door, however, partly reassured me, and when Farber put in his appearance a moment later, I chided myself for being a nervous fool.

He was staggering forward, arms strained and bent under the weight of a large object shrouded in a black cloth covering. Reaching the operating-table with a gasp of relief, he set the square-shaped thing fully under the glare of the suspended light, then turned and carefully placed my chair on a parallel some five feet away.

"Bancroft," he said as I sat down, "I want you to listen and obey instructions very closely. Keep perfectly quiet, fasten your eyes on the object on the table and concentrate your mind upon it as much as you possibly can."

So saying, he turned and whipped off the cloth covering. I stared in astonishment. There before me was a midget piano, the shape of a concert grand, three feet in width and about eighteen inches high. Its sides were painted a lurid crimson, and at a glance I saw that from the ivory keys of its little keyboard to the tiny strings revealed by the open sounding-top, it was a piano complete in every detail. The carving on the diminutive legs was

as intricate as that on the huge Lonway in my study, the entire woodwork perfectly formed. A thick hard-rubber baseboard served as a mounting for the instrument, and at one extreme end of this was a small box with a glass panel. The panel bore a single black-faced dial, but within I could see a world of wires, coils, queer-shaped bulbs and a thick glass winding tube filled with some black liquid.

Farber busied himself for some moments, adjusting and readjusting the dial. Presently the black liquid in the glass tube began to surge back and forth like a steam pressure gage. Then as I glared full upon it, and as my concentration grew more intense, there came a slight hiss, and the fluid raced through the tube, boiling and bubbling like lava. One of the bulbs began to glow cherry red.

AT LAST Farber looked up. "For ten years," he said, "I have worked on the instrument you see here on the table. Until tonight I have had only ridicule and failure for my reward. But tonight a few hours before you came, chance showed me where I had erred. There was only a slight correction to be made, but it changed the principle of the entire working mechanism.

"Now please don't speak. Keep your attention on the piano, and in a moment I will have it tuned to your thought wave. The brain, you know, is a most complex organism. It must be interpreted with care."

He turned to the dial again and began moving it slowly, a fraction of an inch to the right—to the left. Occasionally he glanced back at me, and I could see a rising gleam of excitement in his black eyes. I confess I found it difficult to continue my concentration, as he had asked, upon the object before me. Though my common sense told me it was absurd, I was tempted to examine my chair and see if it were wired like some instrument of torture. A horde of wild thoughts and fears began hammering far back at the core of my brain. I could feel my pulse begin to throb at my temple. And yet, had I tried, I could not definitely have pointed a finger at any single cause of my alarm. At length, however, Farber gave an exclamation of satisfaction, moved back to his chair and sat stiffly upon it.

"You will in a moment find yourself in complete operation of one of the most drastic inventions science has ever known," he said. He was speaking quickly and loudly now, running his words together and almost gasping for breath. "Up until now genius has been vested in only a few persons, and those persons have been hailed as leaders in their field. The truth is that there is genius in many of us, but it is unable to find its proper expression outlet. It is born and dies in the brain without ever seeing the light of the world.

"Psychology has known for a long time that the nervous impulses which course through the brain are electro-chemical in nature, but that these impulses while in action set up a wave motion, psychology has stedfastly refused to admit.

"Call it telepathy, if you need a term, but my postulation was that each thought, each idea, and particularly each strain of melody which passes through the brain sets up a distinct field of motion as existent as the field of an electro magnet or radio broadcasting station, and that if an instrument could be made delicate enough, it would seize those waves and transform them into their actual sound.

"You know yourself how clearly a cer-

tain bit of music will pass through and linger in your mind. The very orchestra, instrument or voice seems to live there in your brain. In your case, perhaps, this is accentuated a thousand times because you are a trained musician.

"You say your method of composing is to wait until a central theme or melody strikes you mentally, and then to transpose it laboriously, first to the keys and then to the written page. Very well, Bancroft, listen to me. I want you to think back, remember some one of your music numbers, some piece which you have played and heard many times and which you can recall note for note. Keep your attention upon this piano, and *think of that music!*"

It was with a curious mixture of emotions that I sat there listening to him. The little crimson piano rested on the table before me like some elaborate toy. The black liquid in the glass tube pulsed steadily upward. And Farber's face was contorted now into an expression of delirious absorption. His hands were opening and closing convulsively. The cords of his neck extended taut like wire. All the old rumors I had heard concerning the man came back to me with a rush. Had I been listening to the ramblings of a man mentally unbalanced? Was this thing, this scarlet piano, a harmless product of a man's brain, or was it, as a small voice within me kept insisting, some fiendish device, the outgrowth of a supernormal intellect, in whose experimental maw I was to be sacrificed? Unconsciously I glanced toward the door, but as if in answer to my thoughts, Farber's voice leaped to my ears like the snap of a whip.

"Are you thinking of the music?"

I tried to guide my mind backward into the maze of piano compositions I have committed to memory. Names of titles, of composers, spun through my head in grand turmoil: waltzes, scherzoes, caprices—what was it I had been playing when Farber's message arrived at my door? . . . Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre.* The weird melody seemed a fitting one for the occasion. I puzzled my brain as to how the composition began. A moment of cogitating, of seeking a mental impression of the opening chord; and then, simultaneously with that instant when the train of melody entered my mind, an astounding thing happened. The piano, five feet away, trembled violently. The light in the queer-shaped bulb increased from a cherry red to a brilliant flaming orange, and the keyboard—as though controlled by invisible hands—that keyboard leaped into motion and began to play—the very music of which I was thinking!

With a terrific start I turned and stared at Farber. He was sitting tensely on the edge of the chair, watching the instrument of his making with dilated eyes—chin thrust forward, body motionless as some Mefisto cut in wax.

"Good God!" I cried "It's . . . it's reading my mind!"

On played the piano, the little keys pressing downward to form the chords and racing along the octaves with lightning speed—faster and faster as my brain ran over the familiar melody. It was *Danse Macabre*—the *Dance of Death*—Saint-Saëns' masterpiece, and it was filling the room with all the tone and depth of a standard-size instrument.

Suddenly, however, as the utter singularity of it claimed my full attention, the tones of the piano dwindled off, and the keys came to a standstill. From deep within me a confusion of reactions burst forth. I could feel my face burning with a fever flush.

FARBER turned abruptly. "The music is no longer passing through your brain," he said. "The musical thought-waves have ceased, given way, I presume, to your complete surprize. You are wondering at the natural tone coming from an instrument of such small size. This is accomplished by a sound-chamber beneath the strings, made of *zyziphus* wood, an importation from central Baluchistan. A rotating light ray is sent through the sound-chamber which automatically brings the reborn tones to their proper vibration. But see if you can concentrate again. Try another composition, one of your own, if you wish, and keep your eyes on the piano."

In a moment I was intoxicated with the strangeness of it. Sitting there tensely, my palms cold with perspiration, I ran my mind through the opening strains of my own fantasy, *Satanic Dance,* and from that with a rush into the middle of Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C Sharp Minor,* and then, not waiting an instant, into the slow tempo of a Chopin lullaby. The piano did not falter. Even as the chords entered my mind they were born into sound on the keyboard. In full obedience the instrument played a few bars of one selection, then leaped to another.

It was weird, it was stupendous; and as I sat there I found it difficult to repress an actual shudder. Yet the moment I submitted to incredulity, marveled at the miracle, and my thoughts, as a result, slipped away from the remembered music—that moment the piano, finding no stimuli, fell into a sudden silence. I saw that in order to make it continue smoothly, I must call every bit of concentration I could to mind, that I must control my thoughts to an absolute chronological succession of the notes and chords of any certain composition. To do this through an entire piece, keyed to fever pitch as I was, was almost an impossibility, and the piano consequently raced from the work of one composer to another in a mad, chaotic fashion.

At last, when it seemed I could think no more, I sank back into my chair and stared speechless at Farber. He too appeared strangely affected by the performance and for a moment said nothing. There was a deep flush of victory slowly mounting in his cheeks, and there was a wild stare of suppressed emotions in his eyes.

"You see, Bancroft," he began suddenly, "I was right. The piano proves my theory and opens a new world for research. This is only the beginning. But let me show you another feature of the instrument, the one probably that will be the greatest aid in the art of composing."

He reached for a second knob, which I had not seen before, and turned it with a snap. The piano began again, this time with no effort on my part. Then in an instant I understood. It was repeating all that it had received, playing it all a second time exactly as it had before. It was not hard to recognize the significance of this act. Once born into sound, the musical inspiration was recorded permanently, could be played as many times as one wished, and then set down on paper at leisure.

All my desire to have that machine on the table as my own personal possession burst forth like a bomb within me. With such a device my composing would know no bounds. I would be famous in a matter of months. The world would sing to my music. My sonata, the first movement of which I had so tediously labored upon, would be finished overnight and would be a flawless translation of my every elusive musical fancy.

"Is it for sale?" I asked hoarsely. "Will you part with it? Will you make

me a duplicate? You can name your price —any price!"

The blue lips before me curled again in their half smile, half sneer. He surveyed me in silence, apparently weighing his answer.

"The piano is still incomplete," he said. "There are other features, additional mechanism, I plan to add. But it will take me three weeks or more to get it ready. During that time I am willing to lend you the instrument for work on your new sonata, provided"—his lineaments hardened suddenly into a look of craft and basic cruelty—"provided you will agree to one thing.

"If your composition is pronounced a success, you must declare to the world that it was conceived—from your own brain, of course—but by the sole means of this piano. You can readily see that my invention can be introduced only by a great musician. In my own hands it would be the mere recorder of simple tunes. But do you agree?"

"Yes," I said shortly, a great elation sweeping over me.

"Then I will have the piano expressed to your apartment early tomorrow. It is, of course, much too heavy for you to carry with you."

I nodded and followed him out of the door and through the dark hallway. At the street entrance I paused.

"May I ask," I inquired, "the nature of the mechanism you plan to add? The instrument seems very complete."

His pallid face was a study in black and white there in the corridor's gloom. The dark liquid eyes turned and stared past me into the street of drizzle and fog.

"Now it is only a servant of the will," he said in a low voice. "It can only receive and bring forth what it receives into sound. Perhaps some day it may interpret and"—he hesitated and broke out into a horrible mirthless falsetto chuckle—"perhaps create and compose itself."

FOR two weeks the piano had been mine, two delirious weeks with the door of my apartment locked to the world. During that time I had worked like a creature bewitched, composing, composing, buried deep in the ecstasy of new creative music. The novelty did not wear off. Meals I limited to repeated cups of strong coffee, and my bed I sought only when absolute weariness threatened to overwhelm me.

During those fourteen days I brought into creation *Valse du Diable, Idyls to Martha, Mountain Caprice,* and *The March of the Cannoneers,* all of which compositions I knew to be the best I had ever accomplished. It was a tremendous amount of work, yet more than that I wove to a sublime finis the thing I had been laboring on for so many months, my *Sonata in B Flat Minor.*

As Farber had said, the repeat device of the instrument was its chief asset. There was no more toiling through the octaves, bar by bar, line by line. I let my brain run unhampered through as much of the passing fancy as I could, then turned the little second knob on the instrument panel and recorded the notes on paper as the piano repeated the strains a second, a third or a fourth time.

I became intoxicated with the spell of it. I neglected to shave, to comb my hair. I sat there in the chair, hour in and hour out, thinking, searching for a basic theme that was original. The piano's uncanny reaction to the slightest stimulus my brain chose to give it, its weird, apparently effortless operation, affected me like drafts from a bottomless flagon of old wine. Like some instrument of Satan it stood there on my library table, the crimson sides contrasting sharply with the dark

walnut of the room's woodwork, the little white keys leaping erratically, feverishly, from chord to chord.

And yet while it was near me I lived under a distinct feeling of unease. Ridiculous as it may sound, the impression stole upon me that the piano was a living thing, that it was watching through hidden eyes my every move. It was absurd, and I knew it, but the feeling would not pass. The device was merely a delicate piece of intricate man-made mechanism; yet a psychic aura seemed to exist about its shape that reached out when I sought to control the sound and gripped me like some powerful drug.

ON THE fifteenth day Martha returned from her visit up Cheshire way, and I hurried over to her apartment. Martha Fleming was the girl I was engaged to marry, and during her long absence from London I had almost died of lonesomeness. I had met her a year before in the course of some musical contact, a common interest in the piano bringing us together. She was an accomplished pianist herself, and I have always maintained that her rendition of Brahms was far more intelligent than my own. But music had been only a byway of acquaintanceship. It was her dark beauty, her ravishing loveliness, her black eyes, deep pools of hypnotic fire, as well as her laughing personality that had caused me to fall madly in love with her. Our wedding day was set for three weeks hence, but the days until then seemed an eternity.

I found Martha's face darkened with a troubled frown when I arrived. There was a look of anxiety in her eyes, and when I took her in my arms and kissed her, her usual joviality seemed missing. At once I began to relate the strange happenings to which I had been a party. Ordinarily an adventure such as I had had at Farber's, especially as it concerned a mutual interest — music — would have roused her to the highest point of excitement. But as I sat across from her now and told the story in detail, her interest was obviously shadowed by something else. Those delicate lips of carmine so often arched in smile were trembling slightly, and there was about her whole manner an attitude that suggested—fear.

"Martha, dear," I said at last, "tell me what's wrong."

She clenched her hands and sat staring out through the open window into the humming traffic of St. Anne's Court.

"It's Kari again," she said slowly.

"Kari?" I glanced at the door of the opposite room, but the maid was not in sight. Kari—queer creature. A year ago Martha in the company of two girl companions had toured and visited the various beauty spots of the West Indies. And it was somewhere in Jamaica while browsing through the back country that she had found Kari, unaffected by present-day modernization and still living a life steeped in the black rites her slave-trade ancestors had brought from Africa.

She was an *obea* woman, a performer of *obi,* that system of darkest sorcery still practised by inland West Indian negroes, which the most rigid British law enforcement has failed to suppress; *obi,* a primitive witchcraft that has been handed down from generation to generation unchanged since its beginning in the tribal villages of the jungle. I had heard of this weird form of black magic before, had read somewhere how the unfortunate victims who had "*obi* put on them" would fall into a morbid state which would finally terminate in a slow unexplainable death, or how, if differently used, the *obea* woman would reveal the events that awaited one in the future.

For some queer reason Martha had been attracted to Kari there in Jamaica. Her heart had gone out to the negro girl when she saw the squalor and superstition under which the poor creature was living, and when she had returned to England, she had contrived to take Kari along as her maid.

I remembered the day Martha had first brought the young dark-faced woman forward and smilingly introduced me to her. "The poor thing's life would have been a sordid thing," Martha had said. "I couldn't bear to leave her there to practise her evil worship. I think she'll make a perfect maid."

But she hadn't made a perfect maid. Although Martha had drilled her in the customs and manners of European etiquette, Kari still clung to her black background. Several times she had given in to her inborn desire for mumbled incantations over a box of grave dirt, dogs' teeth and broken eggshells, and several times she had persisted in foretelling events of the future.

In this respect, I confess my skepticism regarding such matters suffered a severe blow. On three occasions, once in my presence, the negro girl had seemed to throw herself into a trance and slowly chanted a prophecy of what lay ahead. And strangely enough, three times she had been correct almost to every detail.

"What has she told you now?" I asked Martha, assuming an attitude meant to destroy her fears.

For a moment the girl who was to be my wife said nothing. Then running her fingers nervously back and forth over the design on the table, she sketched briefly Kari's latest psychic introspection.

At intervals during the train ride from Cheshire, the negro girl had lapsed into fits of crying and had begged Martha to exercise the utmost caution in everything she did for the next few days. The immediate future, she declared, was very black, and a terrible misfortune lay in store for both of them.

"You shouldn't let such throw-backs to superstition bother you, Martha," I said soothingly. "They mean nothing at all."

"There was a time when I would have thought the same," she answered slowly, "but you—you don't know Kari. Sometimes I think she isn't human. She's not like us. She seems to see deeper into things than we do. Sometimes I almost believe *obi* to be an actual power, something fundamental and primitive which we can not understand."

I talked to destroy her fears, and in the end, though half-heartedly, she agreed to try and guide her thoughts into brighter channels. Then we left for my apartment, where I was anxious to show her the powers of Farber's strange invention.

While we walked I enumerated the compositions I had written in the past few days and waxed enthusiastic over them separately. The strange instrument I described in detail.

"It seems incredible," said Martha. "If it were anyone but you telling me, I wouldn't believe a word of it."

Finally we reached the door of my study. I thrust it open and strode ahead toward the table. Two feet away I stopped dead in my tracks.

The piano was gone! Only empty space on the walnut table met my eyes. For a moment I stared there, motionless, a great tragic disappointment sweeping over me. Then I saw the slip of paper lying on the floor where the draft had evidently blown it, and picking it up, I read the following:

Bancroft:

I am very sorry, but the changes _ have planned to include in the piano are almost ready, and I shall have to take the instrument back sooner than

I expected. I trust that in the short time you have had it, you have found it the means of bringing forth some excellent compositions. If they are favorably received, remember your promise to give the piano its full credit. Possibly when the new additions are fully completed, I may permit you to operate it again.

WILSON FARBER.

With an exclamation of dismay I sank heavily into a chair. The mad adventure was at an end. Those hours which had seemed like an excerpt from the *Arabian Nights* had run to their close. Well, at least I had not wasted the opportunity. Through the instrument's powers I had finished my *Sonata in B Flat Minor.*

AN URGENT request that I go to Chatham Downs to the country manor of my old friend, Major Alden, and play for a group of week-end guests came early next morning. Alden was prominent behind one of the largest music-publishing houses in all Britain. To strain his friendship, if only from a monetary standpoint, would be foolhardy. I telephoned Martha and caught the first train.

Three days later, bored with an interlude of playing before an audience that thought more of cricket than of music, and horribly lonesome, I arrived back in London. But the instant I stepped into the station, stark tragedy fell upon me like the blow of a bludgeon. Even after its full significance had been brought to me by the pages of the *Times* I found myself walking the streets in a half daze, sick with despair, helpless as to what I should do next.

The disappearance of Martha Fleming caused a furor in music circles. A member of the Saturday Musicale and the Etude Society, she had countless friends who were shocked at the thought that anything had happened to her. Scotland Yard raced to the case.

From the landlord of her apartment building I gathered only the feeblest of information. Martha had left her rooms about eight o'clock in the evening without her hat and coat and apparently bound for the little sweet shop around the corner, where she was accustomed to take some light refreshments before beginning her regular evening practise at the piano. The landlord had been particularly attracted to noticing her exit on this evening, two nights ago, because of the strange subsequent actions of Kari, her West Indian negro maid. Scarcely had the street door closed behind Martha, he said, when the negro girl slipped stealthily down the hall and followed her.

The two of them had failed to return, had disappeared completely.

As my bewilderment slowly settled into cold reasoning I became frantic for Martha's safety. I questioned the other occupants of the building again and again. I searched her apartment from room to room trying to find some clue. But I found nothing. Nor did the police have any better results. Martha and her negro maid had disappeared as completely as if they had fallen into another dimension.

Yet I would not give up the hunt. Mad with grief, doubting my very sanity, I paced along the night streets and byways, oblivious of my surroundings, yet searching the face of every passer-by. Hopelessly I offered a reward for information as to her whereabouts. Hopelessly in the privacy of my study I stumbled back and forth, back and forth, swearing to heaven that if she were harmed I would spend the rest of my life finding the guilty person and making him pay the penalty.

There seemed no reason. If it had been kidnapping, there would have been a ransom note; and if murder—I shuddered—some traces of the crime. There

was nothing, nothing save Kari's black inexplicable prophecy to stand out in an otherwise clueless mystery. And even that, I realized, when viewed in mundane surroundings was not something one could tell to a cockney police officer.

At last one night when all my hope had left me I returned to my study, sick to the soul and utterly discouraged. My music meant nothing to me now. If Martha were to be taken away from me I had no other interest in this world.

Without spirit enough to remove my hat and coat, I sat there slumped in the chair, brooding with my thoughts, staring blankly into the glowing coals of the open grate. Then, as if to add to my unpleasantness, came — Wilson Farber. He entered my apartment without knocking, and almost before I was aware of it, he was pushing me out of the door and into the hallway.

"I tell you I'm not interested in your piano," I said. "I don't care how much you've improved it. I have other things on my mind. Please go away and leave me alone."

There was a silky smile as he shook his head. "I know, Bancroft," he said. "I have heard of the misfortune that has befallen you, and you indeed have my sympathy. But I must have a man who is musically trained, inspect the instrument in its new form. I——"

"Get someone else then," I snapped, my disposition strained to the breaking-point. "You can throw the thing into the Thames for all I care."

The white face gleamed before me like an alabaster gargoyle. The voice, purring, soothing, flowed softly to my ears.

"You are the only man I can trust, Bancroft, the only one I've told my secret. Come. It can do no harm. Perhaps it may freshen your mind and give you new vigor in continuing your search."

For a moment I hesitated in indecision. Farber's invention interested me no more. It was Martha and Martha alone that existed in my thoughts. Yet what the man had said about freshening my mind I realized was true. After all, it would do no good to sit home and brood. For almost a week now I had been under a terrific strain. I might clear my brain and start looking again. There must be some clue. And tomorrow——

ALMOST as in a dream I permitted Farber to lead me into a waiting cab. Then once again I was gliding toward that fantastic room in Milford Lane. As I sat there on the jolting upholstery I felt the inventor's black eyes glaring full upon me, seeming to burn their way into my very brain like the rays of an invisible light shaft. A slow numbing dullness stole over me, and my will responded only as a conquered thing.

I found that wild music chamber with its note decorations, aged instruments and black drapes the same as before. But I looked vainly for the midget piano. The operating-table was empty. Then, following Farber's gaze, I saw the thing.

It was mounted on a small extending shelf high up on the right wall at a point just below the ceiling. And as I looked upon it, there came, magnified a thousand times now, that same feeling that it was watching me.

"I have placed the instrument up there," explained Farber, "because I find it is noticeably more susceptible to the thought waves if at a higher position than the level of the operator's eyes. Now your full attention, please, while I adjust its tuning."

He propped a chair against the wall, stood on it and began to turn the little dial on the instrument panel. Five sec-

onds later as I gazed hard upon it, I saw the little bulb within glow cherry red and the black liquid in the glass tube bubble and mount slowly upward.

"I shall leave you to yourself now," said Farber, stepping down. "I want you to be undisturbed in the room alone."

He strode to the door, pulled it open, then slowly turned and faced me again. "I think, Bancroft," he said softly, "I think you will agree that the improvements I have added are very much worth while." He burst out into a peal of laughter and passed into the next room.

Moments dragged by as I sat there staring up at the painted wall. As before, that same sense of uneasiness, that same electric something that seemed to fill the room whenever I was in the piano's presence stole over me. Mingled with it now was a curious impression that the pulsations of the liquid in the glass tube were following the rhythmic cadence of a human heart.

But suddenly I roused myself, stared full at the piano and tried to guide my thoughts to the opening chords of my *Sonata in B Flat Minor*. The instrument was changed, eh? Well, I would operate it once more, and then I would tell Farber I was through with the thing. I would note the improvements as he had requested and then forget it once and for all.

Abruptly as the first strains of my sonata flashed upon my brain, the piano up on the shelf quivered and broke out into the familiar sounds. I leaned forward in my chair, that queer exhilaration rushing over me. But something was wrong. I sensed it, felt it with every nerve of my body. Something like an impalpable miasma was rising from the scarlet instrument and contaminating the air about me.

IT HAPPENED without warning! It came like a black apocalypse of unutterable blasphemy. For a few bars the midget piano followed my thought waves and played the sonata note for note exactly as I had composed it. Then suddenly it lapsed into silence. There was an instant's hesitation, a quiet that rang through that fantastic room like the roar of an inferno.

And then with a leap downward the keys burst forth into a terrific ear-splitting crash of discord. The piano began again, swung wildly into the middle of my sonata, and I stiffened in horror.

It was my sonata, yes. It was my own composition, the work which I knew to be my masterpiece, and the chords were manipulated by my own brain. But oh, how changed, how different! They were rotten with malignity; they were obscene with basic evil. Like a screech from the grave they crashed into sound, searing their way into my eardrums in grinding cacophony. My sonata, which had once been an idyllic interpretation of a peaceful sea, now shrieked at me a threnody of despair, a dirge of unspeakable horror. Quivering, vibrating like a thing accursed, the piano pounded insane harmony, defiling the composition, corrupting it with music of the damned.

I sat frozen in my chair, hot blood rushing to my cheeks, muscles gripped as in a vise. Sweat broke out on my forehead. And as though its keyboard were being controlled by some fantasm of a lethal world, the piano raced on and on, mounting the runs in rising crescendo.

It was diabolical — that music, befouled, sullied by every repulsive sound from the depths, played in a pitch insufferable to the human organism . . . gargoyle tones that shrieked and fell upon one another in a wild orgy of ghoulish frenzy.

And as I sat there riveted in the chair, the painted notes on the frescoed walls seemed to leap upward and reel before my eyes in bacchanalian accompaniment. The mounted mandolins and lutes cried out in a delirious obbligato of sympathetic vibration. On and on through the second and third movements the piano raced, faster and faster as though drunk with its power.

I clawed at the chair arms, a scream gurgling unsounded to my lips. Trained musician though I am, with years of experience in searching through all the intricate combinations known to the laws of harmony, I was hearing now for the first time a melody from an unknown register, from unexplored octaves in black.

The third movement ended in the climax of the composition. It was here that the sonata pounded into a violent dramatic crescendo of booming, racing chords, descriptive of storm waves lashing the Irish coast. And it was here that the midget piano, mounting like the scream of a siren, suddenly crashed out in terrific demoniac fury, rotted harmony from the bottomest pits of hell.

An instant I stood it—no longer. Then with a wild cry I was out of that chair and lunging for the door. Blindly through the gloom of the outer hall I ran, down the long uncarpeted passage, my steps hammering out behind me in a single reverberation.

I reached the door, ripped it open and leaped down the steps two at a time to the sidewalk. There I halted, trembling, shaking, every nerve cut with a thousand needles of pain. My heart was pounding like a runner's, my ears throbbing to their very core. A moment of dizziness, of swirling confusion, and then as the silence of the deserted street gathered to soothe me I turned and began to walk slowly toward the Strand. But from behind, from the huge dark house to the rear, a sound swept through the night air to follow me. It was a laugh, a high-pitched falsetto chuckle, filled with mockery.

I SPENT the next day combing London once more in a determined search for Martha. I wandered through Limehouse; I visited filthy grog shops and sailors' hangouts, engaging in conversation all who were willing to talk. And I beseeched Scotland Yard to continue their hunt.

Nightfall found me plodding wearily along Essex Street, despondent after having run down the last vague rumor to a futile end. A cab-driver had reported he had driven two women, who he vaguely thought answered the description, to an address somewhere in this district. But just where, he had forgotten, and the scant information was of little value. All seemed hopeless now. The world which had been such a beautiful place a few short days ago had turned into a pit of despair.

Bitter, caring little where I went, I found myself shuffling along the empty street, immersed in my thoughts. The very thought of another night in the solitude of my apartment was abhorrent, and I promised myself I would not return until I was so exhausted that sleep would come the instant my head reached the pillow. The fog was rolling in from the river again, thick and moist, sluggishly harmonizing with my mood. And the darkness behind it hung close upon the yellow glare of the street lamps like a black curtain.

At first I walked aimlessly, my mind filled with changing scenes and pictures of happy days when Martha and I had been together. A passer-by jostled

against me, and I startled him with a growl of irritation. But gradually as I moved forward there came the impression that my steps were not altogether haphazard. I was walking in the opposite direction from the way that led to my own distant apartment, and I was entering a part of the city I seldom frequented.

Strangely enough, as I stopped to consider it, a distinct urge that I continue, that I even hurry, stole over me. I mused for a moment in the shadow of a darkened shop front, puzzled at the queer sensation. Then giving in to impulse, I paced forward again. Stronger, a hundred times stronger, that attraction drew me along the street and around a corner at the next intersection.

Suddenly I was aware that my surroundings were somehow familiar, that I had been here before. The avenue before me fitted sharply into a remembered corner of my brain. And then a little shock swept through me from head to foot.

I was on Milford Lane, and the black bulk brooding there just ahead I recognized as number 94, the house of Wilson Farber. Stock-still I stood staring at it, shuddering as I recalled the wild nightmare of events which had sent me running down those steps the night before.

There was something strangely magnetic about that dark building, something that drew me toward its portals and at the same time seemed to warn me away. For a moment I gazed meditatively upon it. Then having no wish to renew my dealings with Farber, I turned to go.

Five steps forward, and I stopped, galvanized to attention. A sound had emerged from somewhere in the depths of that house, a sound that penetrated the silence of the street like a muted tocsin. It was a woman's scream.

An instant I hesitated, scarcely able to believe my ears, waiting for it to be repeated. High-pitched, filled with stark terror, it came again. And distorted though it was, I knew that voice!

With a cry I leaped into action. Up those steps I ran, heart pounding madly, wrenched open the door and plunged into the blackness of the inner corridor. A horde of thoughts and fears were rushing through my brain. The way before me was steeped in silence, sounding only to my footsteps as I tore on.

At the far end of the hall I came upon that door leading to the music room. A pencil of light filtered under the sill, but within was dead quiet. I waited an instant, listening. Then lurching forward I grasped the knob and pushed the door open. The sight that met my eyes flung me backward, staggering as if struck by a blow.

The room was dazzling in its brilliance. Farber was there, Wilson Farber, bending over the lighted operating-table in the center of the room. And upon that operating-table, stretched out as in death, lay the beautiful figure of Martha Fleming!

EXACTLY what happened after that I can not be sure. I remember standing there framed in the doorway, staring at Farber, who was still unaware of my presence. I remember growing suddenly sick as I saw him unfasten her dress at the throat and, bending down, mumble some words of incantation.

Then a bomb burst within me. I lunged forward, leaped upon the man and struck him with every ounce of strength I could call to arm.

It was a tiger that whipped around to face me. Farber's face was contorted into a mask of rage and hate. His black eyes gleamed with menace. His mouth over the slate beard slid into a snarl.

"So you've come, Bancroft?" he said. "Found out at last? Well, I expected you. Even a fool will blunder into the truth, and you had plenty of time. But you are very much in luck. Had you arrived a few moments later you would have missed a very rare operation, a performance worth witnessing, I assure you. If you will kindly take that chair, I will proceed with an experiment that is going to startle the scientific world. If you will——"

I seized him by the arm and jerked him around. "If you have harmed that girl, I'll—I'll kill you!"

Those bluish lips curled before me. "She is in a state of hypnotic trance," he said. "She resisted at first, fought with a man's strength when she realized she was falling under my will. I had to use an injection of morphine. . . . But in a few moments she will be dead. I shall take her soul and——"

Blind fury seized me, and with a crashing blow to his jaw I closed in. I gave no heed to my own protection. My one thought was to crush that face before me. Back and forth across the floor of that fantastic room we struggled, pounding each other mercilessly. There was power and physical strength in those gaunt arms, and in a moment I realized I had more than met my match. Yet all the punishment in the world could not have held me back.

We struck a chair, crashed to the floor and rolled over and over, seeking each other's throat. I buried my fist in his eyes. His knee lashed out into my abdomen. And then all at once I grew faint. One of those iron hands had seized my wrist and was slowly twisting my arm backward to the breaking-point.

With a jerk he raised me from the floor higher and higher, until I lay squirming in his hands two feet over his head. Then his arms shot forward, and I felt myself catapulted into space. The wall leaped to meet me; my head seemed to split open with a dull roar. A wall of flame and dancing lights broiled in my vision, and I sank into a cloud of oblivion.

I was conscious that but a few minutes had elapsed when I opened my eyes. My temple throbbed and as I struggled to rise I found that my hands and feet had been tightly lashed behind me. Two feet away stood Farber, swaying sardonically on the balls of his feet, leering down with an air of childish satisfaction.

"I have delayed the operation for your sake, Bancroft," he said. "I knew you wouldn't have wanted to miss it."

"In God's name," I cried, "what are you going to do?"

He stared at me silently a moment, then turned and pointed high up on the wall at his right. There, gleaming luridly on the overhanging shelf, was the crimson, midget piano. I stared at it without understanding.

"The piano, Bancroft," he said. "I'm going to make my dream of ten years come true. I am going to do something no man has done before. As it stands the instrument will receive your musical thought-waves and transpose them into the actual sound. But I want it to do more than that. I want to make it compose. . . . Compose, do you hear, Bancroft? Create . . . play music of its own making without anyone's help."

"You're mad!" I cried.

He shrugged. "Madness? It is only a relative state. Perhaps I am mad. But if I am, so were the old alchemists of the Middle Ages. Have you ever studied alchemy, Bancroft? It is a most interesting subject. The learning of those sorcerers is a lost art. They made gold, made it out of lead, and the one neces-

sary essence of their mixture was a curious thing—a most unusual thing. It was the soul of a young maiden."

He roared with maniacal laughter. "I think you are beginning to see, eh? It is quite obvious no cold mechanical thing could create music. Impossible. No, it must be an object of warmth; must have a woman's soul. And more than that, the soul of one who has lived a life of music. Are you following me, Bancroft? The very beautiful Martha Fleming is such a woman.

"The procedure is quite simple. I shall remove her heart and brain and insert them in the piano, and I shall keep the heart alive, pulsing in a vacuum tube."

The black eyes continued to bore me through and through. He removed his coat and began to roll back his sleeves.

"When I lured her here by telling her you were taken suddenly ill in my apartment, I did not expect the negro maid to come along. But Kari—yes, that was her name—Kari was a most interesting person. I found to my surprize that she was an *obea* woman from the West Indies. *Obi*—an admirable system of sorcery, Bancroft. The civilized world would do well to study it. I thus had two totally different yet ideal subjects for my experiment. I tried the native girl first."

With a violent start I stared at him. "You mean——"

"I mean that while Kari was not musically trained, her occult background made her worthy of the experiment. You perhaps noticed last night her heart pulsing in the glass tube in the piano. She——"

"You murdered her!" I screamed.

He laughed. "In the interests of science," he said. "The piano still would not compose, but it was no longer a cold, inanimate thing. The powers of *obi* had been woven into it. It was that that rose up and colored your sonata last night. It was that . . . but I am wasting time."

He stepped across to the operating-table and adjusted carefully the powerful light suspended over it.

"Farber!" I cried. "Farber! If you harm that girl——"

A sense of utter helplessness swept over me. I looked frantically from one side of the room to the other, strained and pulled at my bonds, groaned in despair. Must I remain here and watch the girl of my heart dissected without my being able to raise a finger?

Motionless she lay there on the operating-table, face white as chalk under the glaring light. Her black hair had fallen to her shoulders, and her lips were twisted in fear.

FARBER left the operating-table now and moved toward the farther wall. My eyes never left him. Directly under the shelf that held the midget piano was a built-in wall cabinet, and opening the door the bearded man drew forth a white enameled tray.

A wave of vertigo rushed over me as I saw its contents. Knives! Surgical instruments, glittering in all their polished silver. With a moan I fell backward; the room seemed to swirl like a rotating wheel before me. For an instant all was madness. The lights, the walls, the ceiling, Farber himself, swept round and round in a great circle of confusion. My brain was buckling under the strain.

As if measured into focus, a single object took form in my vision—the midget piano up on the shelf. There was that damnable creation that had thrown me into this well of terror. There it stood, tuned to my thought-wave as on the night before, an instrument of Satan. The room had blurred out of the perspec-

tive, and I stared at the crimson thing as one looking through a telescope. All my loathing and hatred for it rose up like a storm within me. I glared at it with a desire to destroy, to tear apart its sides and rip the unholy mechanism from its scarlet interior. Had that piano never been created, this tragedy would never have entered my life. A thing of evil, it was, the product of a distorted intellect, steeped with all the ancient rottenness of *obi* and black witchcraft, colored with an innocent woman's blood.

Then suddenly it happened! As I gazed with utter abhorrence upon it, as my concentration increased a thousandfold, the little bulb within the glass panel flared into orange brilliancy. The ivory keys trembled, shook in their sockets, and an electric shock ripped through me from head to foot. An invisible bond seemed to connect my brain through space with that crimson piano.

And somehow I understood. It was not music that was sweeping from my mind to the inner vitals of that instrument. *It was hate!* Hate—and the piano was reacting to it in a manner which Farber had never dared dream was within its scope. Hate—a thought-wave a thousand times more potent than any musical fancy—born in my brain in a spirit of unutterable loathing — passed on to the piano as a death heritage.

Up there on the shelf the keys were trembling violently like the fingers of a man crazed with fear. Abruptly they came to a standstill, and I found myself glaring at them, eyes still riveted in attraction. Then with a soul-rending thunder of discord those keys surged downward in unison. The piano shook and swayed, and the strings under the open sounding-top screeched forth a chord that was malignant with all the agonies of hell.

Farber, at the wall cabinet directly beneath, stared with an expression of blank astonishment. The tray of knives slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor, and he looked, puzzled, unable to understand.

The chord passed on, and as Farber continued to stare there came now from somewhere within the piano's sides a low, humming sound, a drone as of a distant electric motor.

Louder and louder, growing into a subdued roar, and from a roar into a pounding thunder, it filled the room. The ivory keys began again, quivered in rotation down the octaves. Back and forth in trembling vibration the instrument swayed, rocked crazily on its hard-rubber base.

It was the soul of Kari, writhing in black witchcraft, the spirit of the murdered *obea* woman imprisoned there in the instrument—crying for revenge!

And then—a single titanic repercussion burst forth from the bowels of that piano. It was a sound no human ear could endure, a sound beyond the farthest reaches of man-made harmony. It etched itself deep in my brain, never to be forgotten. To the edge of the shelf the piano toppled, hung there, vibrated, the strings screeching that symphony of horror.

Farber came to life too late. With one mad lunge he sought to throw himself out of the instrument's reach. He screamed and attempted to jump sideways.

It was futile. The piano fell, shot out into space and roared downward. Straight toward that upturned ugly, bearded face it hurtled as if aimed—struck with a sickening thud.

There was a single shriek of agony, a rending of wood and broken bone, and I turned my eyes away, sick to the soul.

It is Martha, not I, who remembers the happenings of the next few moments. The death of Farber released her instantly from her hypnotic trance. She came to her senses slowly, looked about her as if awakening from some wild dream, and then stumbled from the operating-table. It was she who released me from my bonds and helped me to my feet. Then, weak and trembling, we passed out the door and through the black corridor to the street. I looked back when I reached the walk, looked back in answer to a grim and fearful fascination.

There was that huge disproportionate building with the three bulging colonnades rising to form a claw of granite before the black façade. There were the dark eye-like windows staring sullenly forward, leering at me like a monstrous sea-bat.

I shuddered, passed my arm around Martha, and led her gently toward the Strand.

Incubus

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

She said,
A creeping, crawling thing had lain
Each night upon the counterpane. . . .

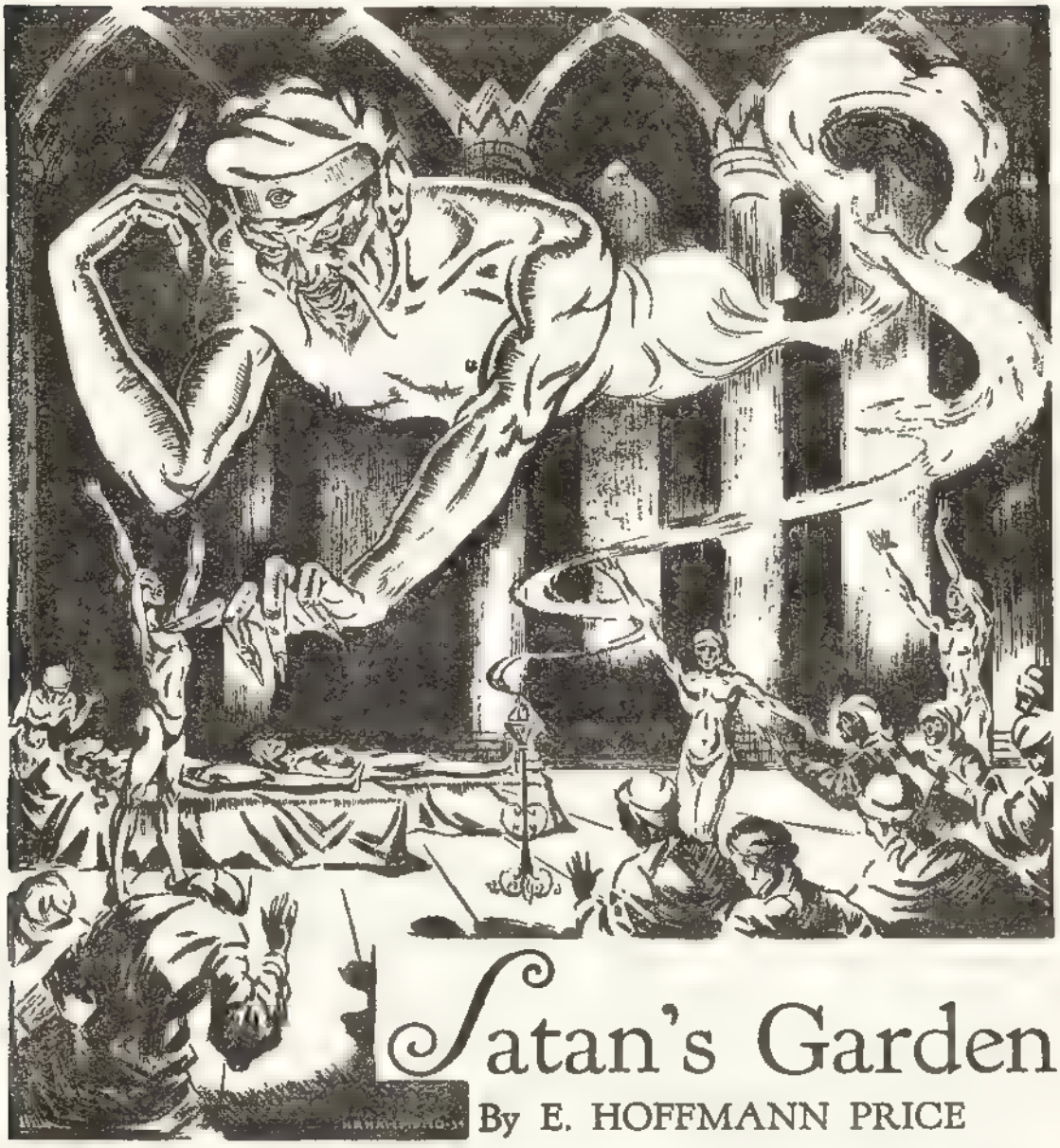
They said,
It could not be, it only seemed
To be; she had but dreamed. . . .

She said,
Sometimes at night she felt its breath,
Fetid like the breath of death. . . .

They said,
Hallucination without question;
She must be treated by suggestion. . . .

They wore her nerves down by suggestion,
For hallucination without question,
And were amazed one dawn to find her dead,
With marks upon the pillow and the bed
As if some creeping, crawling thing had lain
All night beside her on the counterpane.

"A terrific tension pervaded the tumult. The Presence took human form!"



Satan's Garden

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

The story of a terrific adventure in Bayonne, two ravishingly beautiful girls, occult evil and sudden death in the lair of the hasheesh-eaters

The Story Thus Far:

NIGHT after night Antoinette Delatour dreams that she is an odalisque in an Oriental garden, by whose Master she is mercilessly flogged. Her fiancé, Glenn Farrell, and her distant kinsman, Pierre d'Artois, are seeking to solve the psychic riddle. Even as they watch the sleeping girl they see fresh welts appear on her back as the phantom scourge makes her writhe with anguish. They hear her say, *"Junayn ash-Shaytan,"* which in Arabic signifies Satan's Garden.

The following morning Farrell sees the actress, La Dorada, driving the car of

the Marquis des Islots. For an instant Farrell mistakes her for Antoinette, then sees that the resemblance is superficial. He learns that Antoinette's ankles are now distinctly marked by the massive anklets which she wears in her recurring dream. But more significant, however, is her having recognized the Master of the Garden as the Marquis des Islots.

D'Artois suspects the return of the hasheesh-crazed Ismailian fanatics, assassins, and necromancers, who centuries ago terrorized Syria and Persia. He orders Farrell to look about the city for any Orientals who show signs of hasheesh intoxication. Farrell sees La Dorada step from the car of the Marquis des Islots. Three swarthy foreigners stab her before Farrell can intervene; and while he kills two with his pistol, the third escapes.

That evening d'Artois receives an invitation from the Marquis des Islots to attend a meeting of the Thaumaturgical Order of Thoth. A Kurd, Shirkuh, welcomes them in behalf of the Marquis, who is unable to attend. Shirkuh works a necromancy whereby the dead body of La Dorada is temporarily revived to greet the guests and invite them to a Garden across the Border. D'Artois and Farrell, horrified, depart unmolested. Upon their return to the city, they find that Antoinette has been kidnapped.

D'Artois points out the unbroken thread of evidence which indicates the presence of the terrible Ismailian Brotherhood of Assassins. Farrell disguises himself as an Afghan ruffian and seeks to work himself into the inner circle and thus rescue Antoinette. This device succeeds; but on the way to the headquarters of the Grand Master, Farrell quarrels with his guide, and is overpowered by numbers and taken prisoner.

6. *Satan's Garden*

THE slow, steady drip-drip-drip of water dropping against stones crept into Farrell's consciousness and finally became an impression distinct from the trip-hammer throbbing of his battered head. He stirred, and found that he was not bound. The holster under his left arm was empty. One of his knives, however, remained.

"If they wanted my hide, they could have taken it in the alley," he reflected as he pieced together his recollections of the encounter. "So far, it looks as if I've got 'em fooled."

Then, in Arabic, "*Aie* . . . my head! O dogs and sons of dogs, come out and fight! *Ya* Nureddin, thou son of a strumpet, thou uncle of camels! Thou eater of unclean food!"

The cell echoed with his bellowing. As he paused for breath, he reeled, clutched at the wall from whose base he had arisen, and supported himself. A torch flared smokily in the distance, from its sconce in the wall of the passage that opened into his cell.

"Father of many pigs!" he stormed as he kicked the iron grillework that barred his advance, and rattled the chain and lock that secured the door.

The clattering and jangling finally drew a protest from beyond Farrell's field of vision. Then a fat, white-bearded fellow with bleary eyes and a bloated, sottish face emerged from a cross passage.

"Silence a moment!" he croaked as he took the torch from its sconce and advanced toward the grille.

"Bring me that dog of a Nureddin!" raged Farrell.

"One thing at a time," replied the warden. "Calm down and I'll promise you action."

"Oh, very well, then," agreed Farrell. "Lead on, Uncle."

Uncle drew a pistol and, keeping Farrell covered, unlocked the door.

"Now, wild man, forward!" he ordered. "And no false moves."

The slimy, glistening sides of the passage indicated that they were far beneath the surface of the city; perhaps in that labyrinth of vaults and connecting tunnels of which local tradition has murmured darkly and vaguely. Although his head ached from contact with material weapons wielded by physical enemies, Farrell shuddered at the evil that brooded about that archaic masonry and muttered of that which had emerged to defile the dead with obscene necromancies, and torment the living with monstrous hallucinations that came in the guise of dreams. The aura of age-old menace overpowered the terror of the Ismailian assassins.

"To your left," commanded the warden.

As Farrell rounded the turn, he saw ahead of him a glow of light and smelled the heavy, lingering fumes of incense. An Arab, and a bearded man whose race he could not determine, stood watch at the farther archway. Their hands rested on their belts, ready to draw knife or pistol. Their eyes stared fixedly from immobile features. They were drugged, or entranced: and Farrell shivered at the necessity of convincing himself that they were not dead.

"Pass on," commanded the warden as Farrell hesitated at the threshold. "The Master, our lord Hassan, will receive you."

The lord Hassan—the one whose name the dying La Dorada had with her last breath pronounced. She had known who had ordered her death.

A thrill of exultation was mingled with the flash of dread that assailed Farrell as he stepped into the reception hall of Hassan, that slayer of women and master of necromancers.

The room was long and narrow, and sweltering in a red glow of light. A Persian carpet ran down the center toward the divan in an arched alcove at the farther end. A man wearing a silken kaftan sat cross-legged among heaped cushions. His face was veiled, but his fierce eyes, smoldering in their deep sockets, were more menacing for being all that was visible.

Farrell halted midway between the alcove and the entrance. From the corner of his eye he saw a row of men, dressed in European clothes, sitting cross-legged along the wall on either side of him. Their arms were crossed on their breasts, and their eyes stared as glassily as those of the guards at the entrance. They were drugged, or deep in a hypnotic trance.

Farrell offered the peace.

"No peace and no protection, *ya* Ibrahim," responded Hassan, "until we have made a test of you."

"Tawil ul 'Umr," demanded Farrell with a touch of respect such as even a blustering Afghan would concede an old man; "Prolonged of Life, how am I to be tested?"

The old man reflected for a moment. His glittering eyes narrowed to slits.

"Tell me, can you obey as well as slay?"

"How should I know, Prolonged of Life?" proposed Farrell. "By your beard, I have never tried obedience. I am of the Durani clan."

"You will learn," said Hassan. "I will set you an example." He glanced to his left and clapped his hands. "Asad!" he called sharply.

One of the staring figures rose from his place along the wall. He moved as

one receiving will and animation from some external source.

"Harkening and obedience, *ya sidi!*" he acknowledged as he halted before the dais.

"Your canjiar," murmured Hassan.

The curved blade flashed from its sheath.

"That knife is your gate to Paradise, *ya* Asad," said Hassan in his gentle, purring voice. Yet beneath its suggestion Farrell sensed a relentless command.

Asad inclined his head as he touched his fingertips to his forehead, his lips, and his breast. A pause — the blade flashed again as Asad thrust it full into his own chest. He stood for a moment fingering the hilt; then he tottered and sank to the tiles, to relax and lie sprawled face down in the dark pool that slowly spread across the paving.

Farrell knew that beneath his grimy skin his cheeks were bloodless. It was horrible to see even a *hasheeshin* spill his life carelessly as a glass of wine to humor that old man who peered over the edge of his veil.

"There, *ya* Ibrahim, is obedience."

Farrell collected his courage and demanded boldly, "And why should any man yield such obedience?"

"Because," came the reply, "I am the keeper of the gateway. He is even now in Paradise, and exempt from any recall."

Farrell grimaced.

"No more than any true believer gains for slaying an infidel," he retorted.

"You will enter the Garden, *ya* Ibrahim," murmured Hassan, "and see for yourself. Then you may accept or reject."

To the Garden! There, unless all d'Artois' deductions were wrong, he would find Antoinette. But Farrell restrained his eagerness, and pondered a moment, as became the rôle he played.

"I am ready, Prolonged of Life," he finally replied, as he advanced a pace.

"Softly, softly," said Hassan. "Are you armed?"

"Ay, wallah!" replied Farrell, drawing his remaining knife.

Hassan again clapped his hands.

"Ya Suleiman! Yusuf!"

Two rose from the ranks and approached.

"Harkening and obedience, my lord," they said as they bowed.

"This one claims to be a man of valor, O Devoted Ones!" said Hassan. "Draw!"

Their blades were drawn as one. The slayers stood like panthers poised and ready to close in on their prey. Their eyes glowed in the red glare like beasts lurking in the shadows beyond a fire. Slaves to the mesmeric power of Hassan, and to the hypnotic hasheesh, they were men in form only.

Hassan glanced at Farrell.

"You may decline without penalty or dishonor," said the old man. "You are free, and owe us no obedience."

"They are your men, *ya sidi,*" replied Farrell with a shrug. "If you can spare them."

The old man chuckled, and his eyes for a moment smiled.

"Strike!" he commanded.

They paused for an instant before closing in. One of them, Farrell was certain, would go down before his first thrust, but the other would slay him. Farrell's success depended upon finesse. He shifted his feet as if to test the footing. He glanced over his shoulder as if to assure himself that he had room to retreat. All in a flash: and then they sprang, blades thirsty and a-glitter.

Farrell's leap took him to the left instead of to the rear. He dropped his

knife and snatched the wrist of the nearest enemy, who, missing his quarry, plunged forward abreast of his comrade.

His own momentum was his ruin. There was the snap of a breaking bone, and Yusuf pitched in a heap before the dais. And Farrell, picking his knife from the tiles, confronted Suleiman, who despite his fanatic frenzy was profiting by Yusuf's mishap.

They circled, feinting and thrusting, seeking to shake each other's guard. Suleiman avoided Farrell's efforts to close in to make it a test of strength. Nor would rushing in to exchange thrusts suffice: for if they slew each other, the Master would still not have the test he ordered. They wove in and out, shifting and side-stepping, each seeking an opening in the other's defense.

Then Farrell made a desperate feint at his enemy's throat. As Suleiman's blade rose to parry, Farrell evaded, and stretched out in a full lunge, point forward and arm extended as with a rapier. The unexpected play caught Suleiman off guard. His downward thrust came an instant too late: Farrell's knife sank to the hilt in the enemy's stomach, ripping upward.

FARRELL, bleeding from the cut on his shoulder, emerged from the engagement empty-handed as Suleiman collapsed.

"Well done, *ya* Ibrahim!" approved Hassan. Then he smote a gong beside the dais.

"*Ya* Musa! Abbas! Khalil!" he shouted.

A panel opened at right of the dais, and three tall negroes entered. They made no expressions of obedience; only the inarticulate gurglings of those whose tongues have been removed.

Hassan indicated the two dead, and the one whose arm was snapped.

"To the black pool with them. All three!" Then, as two stepped forward to execute the command, Hassan spoke to the third: "Take our new aspirant, Ibrahim, to the Garden."

Musa bowed, and at the Master's gesture of dismissal, led Farrell into a dimly lighted room which was arranged after the fashion of a *majlis*, or reception hall of an Arabian house.

A narrow divan extended the full length of the wall. At the end farthest from the entrance were the customary coffee hearth and polished brass pots. And save for those, and the cushions and rugs with which the divan was covered, there were no furnishings.

Farrell noted that he was not alone. Those who lay sprawled on the divan were, apparently, likewise to visit the Garden.

"Dead-drunk . . . drugged . . . or spies to watch me," reflected Farrell.

Musa, who after indicating that Farrell was to seat himself, had left, presently returned with a tray on which was a goblet and flagon. These he set on a small tabouret, bowed, and left Farrell to refresh himself.

The proof of hand-to-hand fighting had been severe enough; but the flagon of wine, fragrant but reeking of hasheesh, represented a more subtle and dangerous test. If under the influence of the drug Farrell made one remark or gesture that would betray his imposture, the awakening would be death, either swift, or else by torture administered to find out how much the outside world knew of the Ismailians. Nevertheless, Farrell dared not abstain from the drugged wine. He knew not what eyes might be regarding him through loopholes in the wall.

"*Bismillahi!*" he ejaculated, and seized the flagon, draining it at a draft. He hoped that despite the insidious drug, his

years of wandering in the forbidden places of Asia had impressed upon him enough of his assumed character to insure him against a fatal slip.

Farrell wondered at the suicide ordered by Hassan. The value of Ibrahim Khan as a *fedawi* could scarcely balance the self-slain and the two killed in action. He reconciled this point, however, when he considered the probability of the slain being offenders against the discipline of the order. . . .

The intoxication of hasheesh was gripping him. Then an artifice occurred to Farrell. He might still save the day and avoid complete intoxication.

"*Ya* Musa! *Shewayya' khamr!*" he bawled drunkenly. "More wine!"

The slave came hurrying with a full flagon. Farrell's chance was to drink so much of the drugged liquor that his stomach would rebel, and expel it; and such sottishness would be quite in character. He seized the flagon with unfeigned eagerness.

But the saving thought had come too late.

His heart-beat became terrifyingly slow. His arm seemed so long that the weight of the flagon, already the size of a cask, and momentarily becoming larger, would exert a leverage that would upset him. The room was expanding to allow for the abnormal length of the arm that sought to raise the wine to his lips.

Farrell became aware of a duality of identity. Half of him was struggling fiercely to assert itself and overcome the confusion of his senses; the other half was yielding to a languorous drowsiness, and a soporific humming which pervaded the room.

There came finally a rustling of wings, and a piping, haunting music that sighed amorously. All sense of time had ceased. Farrell did not know whether he was being carried through an archway into a vast domed vault, or whether he had floated in on clouds of overwhelming sweetness.

A fountain was bubbling, and splashing him with its spray. He stared up at the ceiling. Its luminous blue was dusted with stars that were arranged in unfamiliar constellations.

Drums muttered somewhere in the shifting, warm fragrance. He heard the silvery clink-clinking of anklets. He rolled over on his side, and as he glanced along the rose-hued tiles, he saw dainty feet with hennaed nails stepping in cadence to the whining notes of a *kemenjah,* and the moan of pipes.

As he made an effort to sit erect, a warm, soft arm supported his head, and slender, golden-brown hands offered him a bowl of cold, aromatic liquid. He drank it, and found that his reeling senses became more stable. The girl who smiled at him had great dark eyes with kohl-blackened lids.

Another heaped cushions behind him.

Paradise indeed; *al jannat,* temporarily offered as the reward of whatever infamy the lord Hassan demanded, and promised for all eternity to the fanatic *fedawi* who died executing his commands.

There were other guests scattered about the jasmine and rose clustered garden, and the brides of *al jannat* were reviving them with flagons, cold drinks, and warm caresses.

FARRELL made an effort to fight the illusion of distorted time and distance, and the sensuous allure of the music and hasheesh. He rose, and ignoring his amorous companions, set about exploring the garden. Strange birds flitted about among the orange and pomegranate trees and mocked him with their almost articulate cries. A parrot mimicked in a

loud voice the endearments that a Malay girl murmured in the ear of one of the Devoted Ones.

"Where is the Golden One?" he heard a swarthy Kurd demand as he thrust aside his slant-eyed Eurasian companion.

The last of Farrell's intoxication left him. The Golden One—Antoinette!

The girl laughed.

"She'll scratch your eyes out! Let her alone!"

"But the Master, our Lord Hassan, promised she'd greet us in Paradise," protested the Kurd.

Farrell knew now beyond any doubt that Antoinette had been kidnapped to double in this satanic garden for the murdered La Dorada, to prove to the *hasheeshin* that the Lord Hassan indeed held the keys to the garden of resurrection.

"*Al Asfarani,* the Golden One——" Farrell seconded the Kurd's inquiry.

"Snarling and spitting in her alcove, O Strong Man!" smiled the girl.

Farrell left her to entertain the Kurd, and wandered past the rows of potted trees that paralleled the walls of the garden. The walls were pierced with deep niches that formed small rooms whose arched entrances were scarcely shoulder-high. As he glanced into each in succession, he noted the trinkets and cosmetics and perfumes, and articles of feminine apparel. Each bride of *al jannat* seemed to have her own lupanar; but they apparently preferred to lounge among the fountains and arbors.

Finally, however, Farrell found an occupied alcove. A woman lay face down among a heap of cushions. Her hair was copper-golden, and her bare shoulders were latticed with long, bluish stripes.

Farrell knelt at her side.

"Antoinette!" he whispered.

At the touch of his fingers on her shoulder, she started and with a quick motion drew away. Her hand emerged from the cushions clutching a long sharp steel skewer used in Syria for grilling meat.

It was Antoinette, wide-eyed with terror. She cried out, and stabbed at Farrell with the skewer. The point raked his cheek as he seized her wrist.

" 'Toinette! Don't you recognize me?" he whispered hoarsely.

She regarded him for a moment, puzzled and incredulous. The skewer dropped from her fingers. But before she could cry out in amazement, Farrell continued, "Not a word! If any one passes by, start raising the devil! Don't seem to recognize me . . . understand?"

She nodded, but he saw that she did not grasp the point that might make the difference between life and death. She was still bewildered.

"Oh, Glenn. . . ." She stroked his cheek and regarded him, still incredulously. "Are you—isn't this—my dear, this is that awful garden I dreamed of. Only, now I have my own body, and I don't wake up——"

"Pipe down!" he commanded in a low, tense voice. "I'm supposed to be one of these devils! You're not dreaming. Pull yourself together——"

He heard footsteps approaching. They were steady, not the jerky lurchings of wine and hasheesh intoxication. Whoever it was, was for Farrell a death sentence if Antoinette in her hysteria spoke one false word.

"Scream! Claw me! As you treated the others!"

Then he seized her in his arms and murmured drunken endearments in her ear.

But Antoinette was too dazed by the meeting to play her part. She clung to

Farrell as the one fragment of reality in all that unending nightmare of hasheesh-drugged assassins who courted her favor, and pawed her, and abandoned their advances only at the suggestion of more amiable brides of *al jannat*. Instead of clawing and defying Farrell, she clung to him, sobbing hysterically.

THAT deliberate tread of doom, soft slipper shod, drew nearer, paused.

Farrell trembled like a trapped animal. He sought with his own feigned drunken, amorous approaches to drown her betraying sobs and murmurs.

The swish-slap of slippers . . . another halt. Farrell felt the intentness of the gaze at his back.

He broke from Antoinette's embrace and turned. Standing just within the entrance of the tiny room was Shirkuh the necromancer. He had seen Farrell at the château, face to face. And he had heard. He knew.

"Ah . . . La Dorada has lured you to the Garden?" he murmured with deadly emphasis on the dead woman's name.

The smile was slow and mocking; the relentless eyes burned with a fanatical hatred. For a moment Farrell was paralyzed with terror, and horror at the doom from which Antoinette had no further chance of escape.

Shirkuh relished the encounter, and gloated—but just an instant too long.

Farrell sprang from his crouched position in one swift, fluent motion. Shirkuh, taken cold-footed, could not draw his knife. They crashed to the floor. But once Shirkuh recovered from the surprize of the assault, he was more than a match for Farrell, who was battered, weary from combat, and shaken by the drugged wine. The iron fingers of the Kurd sank into his throat and throttled him. Shirkuh whipped his lithe body aside, avoiding Farrell's frenzied efforts to drive home with his knee. As Farrell's struggles subsided to a futile gasping for breath, the Kurd's hand flashed to his belt and drew a knife——

But before the stroke descended, there was a crash and a splintering of glass. Shirkuh toppled over, felled by a decanter that Antoinette had broken across his head. Farrell gasped, and caught his breath, then slowly dragged himself clear of his enemy.

Antoinette, still clutching the neck of the broken decanter, regarded him with terror-widened eyes. Then she gestured toward Shirkuh, who muttered and stirred.

Farrell's fingers closed about the hilt of the knife the Kurd had dropped.

"Me or him," muttered Farrell. "If you don't want to see it, look the other way."

The blade flashed thrice.

Farrell wiped the red steel and slipped it into his empty scabbard. Then he sighed wearily and despairingly.

"Finish anyway . . . they'll miss him . . . and no place we can hide him."

Antoinette stared at the dark pool that spread across the silken rug.

"Can't cut my way out," muttered Farrell. "But you have a chance. Pierre and the *Sûreté* are on the job—is there any place we could hide that fellow?"

Antoinette shook her head.

"Nowhere. The pool of the fountain isn't deep enough——"

"Never mind the fountain!" interrupted Farrell, as he leaped to his feet. "I have a hunch. We're not quite ready to hang old man Farrell's youngest son!"

At the entrance Farrell turned, reassured Antoinette with a gesture, then stalked out into the Garden, chanting a bawdy song in Turki.

BESIDE the fountain he found the object of his search: a bemuddled Kurd, and the Eurasian girl who had finally convinced him that the Golden One was best left to the blustering Afghan.

"Get us more wine, O Moon of Loveliness," said Farrell with his most engaging smile. He nudged the Kurd.

The girl laughed softly.

"You look as though she gave you your fill of clawing!"

"Ay, wallah!" agreed Farrell with a broad grin. Then, as the girl picked up an empty flagon, he said in a low voice to the Kurd, "Brother, you fellows didn't approach *al Asfarani* the right way."

He winked and beckoned.

The Kurd clambered to his feet and followed Farrell. They paused at the arched entrance of Antoinette's alcove.

"She's in there now," whispered Farrell. "She'll not claw you."

Thus encouraged, the Kurd stepped in, Farrell following.

"Ya sitti," he began, addressing Antoinette. Then he started, seeing the body of Shirkuh.

Farrell slipped past, and toward Antoinette's divan.

"Out of my way, O shamelessly Besotted!" growled the Kurd, pausing to nudge the body with his toe.

During that instant Farrell found what he sought; and as the Kurd decided to ignore the supposed sot, the steel skewer drove home, its point projecting beyond his shoulders.

"Sorry, old man," muttered Farrell as he regarded the Kurd twitching and coughing his life out in a bloody foam. Then he rapidly searched the body.

He found no weapons.

"Disarm 'em when they come in here . . . leaves me handicapped . . ."

He thrust Shirkuh's knife into the hand of the dying Kurd and closed the fingers about it. Then he guided the hand of Shirkuh and clenched it about the blunt end of the skewer.

"This may save the day," he explained to Antoinette. "Remember, they fought and killed each other. That may give me a long enough lease on life to come back and get you out of this hell's hole, or get word to Pierre. Now I've got to go out into the Garden and do some quick thinking. Something else may turn up . . . no, I can't stay here with you . . . and I've got to leave the bodies where they are."

Then, as he kissed her, "Hang on. There's still a chance for you. Maybe for us."

He strode out into the Garden, and washed his blood-stained hands at the fountain. The Eurasian girl had not yet returned with the replenished flagon. And as Farrell glanced about, looking for her, and preparing to divert her from any thought of her former companion, Musa the mute negro approached with a jar on his shoulder and a cup in his hand.

This, Farrell surmised, would be the end of the visit to Paradise. The negro would administer a sleeping-potion; the devoted ones would drink, and upon awakening would find themselves lying in the *majlis*, mysteriously translated from the empyrean realm of the Lord Hassan, and ready for whatever butcheries he could assign them.

As Musa offered him the cup, Farrell extended his own flagon, saying, "Fill this one, Father of Blackness. That cup of yours is too small."

The negro grinned, emptied the cup into the larger vessel, and went his way to minister to the other guests.

The Eurasian beauty, who returned at that moment, was easily diverted, so that Farrell contrived to spill most of the

drugged wine over his shirt-front and into the fountain. Then, as he saw the *fedawi* succumb to the effects of the drug, he himself lurched forward, feigning unconsciousness.

"No chance to look around . . . no chance of cutting my way out," he reflected as he thought of Antoinette and her ghastly companions. "And maybe the Shirkuh versus drunken Kurd formation will hold water long enough to give me time to qualify as an assassin and be sent out to do a bit of slaying!"

The negro was making the rounds, taking the *fedawi* one by one from the Garden. He picked Farrell from the paving as though he were a bag of meal, shouldered him, and deposited him on the divan in the anteroom, beside his drugged companions.

And from sheer weariness and the futility of further thought, Farrell fell asleep.

7. *A Left-Handed Kurd*

WHEN a cold sponge on his forehead and the rim of a copper bowl pressed to his lips awoke Farrell, he had no idea as to the length of his sleep.

Musa helped him to his feet and led the way down a narrow passage whose floor sloped perceptibly upward. The negro halted before a panel and tapped thrice. As the panel slid aside, he gestured and flattened himself against the wall so that Farrell could pass him and enter the chamber ahead.

Farrell stepped into a circular vault fully twenty yards in diameter. In its center was a pool, likewise circular, and surrounded by a coping about a foot high. A dark splash on the tiles near the pool convinced Farrell that this must be the place into which the bodies of the victims of his test before Hassan had been tossed.

Farrell wondered if as a matter of convenience he had been conducted to the vault before the master cut him down. One slip would suffice. . . .

Directly opposite Farrell was an arched niche in which sat an old man whose head was bowed in contemplation. Suspended from the crown of the arch was a cluster of crystalline prisms that slowly rotated, giving the effect of a glowing, coruscating ball of light.

As Farrell advanced, the door behind him slid silently into place. He skirted the edge of the pool in the center, and wondered from what abyss its black, untroubled waters emerged; what creatures lurked in its darkness to devour the bodies tossed into their pit. Then, leaving the pool, Farrell continued toward the bearded sage who still ignored his approach.

"At thy command, *ya shaykh!*" said Farrell as he halted some five paces from the Presence.

"Step forward," directed the ancient one, looking up and indicating a small hearth-rug that lay at the foot of the steps that ascended to the niche. "Look, *ya* Ibrahim: hast thou seen me before?"

As the smoldering eyes narrowed, Farrell recognized Hassan, now unveiled. He returned the old man's unblinking stare, and strove to remain unperturbed by its intent concentration; but his effort was vain. He felt a sense of futility and weakness creeping over him.

The rotating cluster of prisms now flamed and flashed with an adamantine fire that expanded and contracted and pulsed like a living thing. It seemed now to be glowing between the eyes of Hassan. An overwhelming weariness assailed Farrell.

The old man's voice intoned sonorously, and as from a great distance.

"I am the keeper of the gateway . . . even in the hollow of my hand I hold

al jannat and its coolness to the eyes. . . . Yea, behold my hand. . . ."

Farrell regarded the outstretched hand of Hassan.

"In the hollow of my hand, even in this hand I hold *al jannat*. . . ."

A mistiness was gathering about Hassan, and his features became obscured so that only his glittering eyes peered through. The outstretched hand was expanding; and strangely enough, it seemed fitting to Farrell that this should be so, and that there should be hazy figures, and clots of greenness appearing in the blankness above the hand. Trees were taking root. Their outlines were hazy, and through their immaterial substance he could just distinguish the jambs of the niche, and the swirling mists that veiled Hassan.

The voice was now murmuring softly and compellingly.

"Even in this hand I hold the Garden. . . . I am the keeper and the warden. . . . I accept and I reject. . . ."

Then that which in the back of his brain had kept Farrell from utterly succumbing to the sorcery of that murmuring voice and those burning eyes asserted itself, and he knew that it was illusion. As he sought to resist and deny, he felt a terrific impact as of a physical substance. A mighty, implacable will bludgeoned him as with hammer blows. He knew that if he continued assenting he would be for ever enslaved.

"There is no Garden. It is illusion," he asserted to himself, and forced his lips to move and silently enunciate the negation. He trembled with an all-compelling fear, the awful fear of losing his very identity. That devastating will behind the cloud-veil was crushing him. How easy to assent, and end the agony!

Great beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. His face was drawn and haggard with the torment of his battered will. But to surrender would betray Antoinette into the hands of the enemy.

"There is no Garden," he persisted. "His hand is *empty*. EMPTY. EMPTY!

He forced his last vestige of strength into that final declaration. The trees dwindled to pin-heads of green, and with them vanished the gray mists. The hand *was* empty!

Farrell sighed from mortal weariness and relief. Then he smiled triumphantly. He had withstood the terrific psychic assault that would have made him a slave, and a vassal of that old man and the murderous heritage of Asia.

Hassan smiled as at an ancient jest.

"You have withstood my will as no man before you," he said. "There was one who resisted to the uttermost, but he dropped dead."

Hassan, the heir of Maymun the magician, the sorcerer, the heretic, took his defeat gracefully. Then his smile became ominous and mocking.

"Who but you would have had the wit to slay Shirkuh, the chief of my servants, then so arrange the body of another you slew, that it would seem that they had died quarrelling over *Al Asfarani*? Subtle serpent, you erred in putting the dagger in the right hand. That Kurd was left-handed."

As those words hammered home, Farrell wondered if his heart would ever again start beating. He was lost, and with him, Antoinette. Doomed by his own cunning.

But thus far, no word about his imposture; therefore Farrell laughed full in Hassan's face, as became the honor of the Durani clan.

"*Wallah*, you put a premium on slayers! Now what award do you give me, seeing that I was unarmed when I slew Shirkuh?"

Hassan regarded him admiringly for a moment.

"*Billahi,* but you do belong to us! Not as a hasheesh-besotted fool to slay and be slain, but as an Associate, and finally, an Initiate. It is such as you that we seek, and seek in vain."

A fierce light flamed in Hassan's eyes.

"Yet your victory over my will is your doom. In the fullness of your effort to deny the illusion, you finally spoke your negation aloud. *And you spoke in English!*"

For an instant Farrell was dazed by the horror that had been heaped on the soul-racking triumph he had just won. Doom was at hand—doom inescapable, else that old man would not dare confront him alone.

With a cry of rage, Farrell sprang to throttle Hassan despite what unseen allies he might have. But the floor sank beneath his feet as Hassan, smiling and unmoved, fingered a knob near the jamb of the arch. Farrell clutched at the edge of the opening through which he was dropping. His fingers sustained him for a moment, but the momentum of his body swinging free into vacancy broke his slender hold. He fell into the impenetrable blackness below.

8. *Monsters of the Pool*

INSTEAD of an interminable drop to the bottom of an abyss, Farrell landed in less than a second, and feet foremost, on slippery flags. He noted that the air was not as stagnant as one would expect in an oubliette.

"Plenty of circulation . . . just put me in temporary storage until they get around to organizing a committee to finish me with pomp and ceremony," he muttered as he struck a match.

Farrell saw that the walls of the dungeon were curved. He strode toward the center, and by the light of a second match saw a massive column of masonry which rose from floor to ceiling. He remembered the pool he had seen on the floor above, and concluded that the pillar before him was a hollow shaft which led to some subterranean spring in the heart of the knoll on which Bayonne was built.

"All in one piece, unhurt, and no enemy in sight—yet!" he reflected as he skirted the column.

Among the inevitable rubbish with which the dungeon would be littered Farrell hoped to find some fragment of rock, scrap of wood, anything, in fact, which would give him the means of meeting the enemy with more than bare hands. But before he could strike his next match, Farrell saw a glow of light at a considerable distance to his right. It faintly outlined a low archway, and suggested possible escape from the dungeon into which he had been dropped by Hassan. That same light, however, betokened the immediate presence of the enemy, and perhaps an armed sentry. Farrell therefore crept on in darkness until he was well out of line with the source of light, then left the column and progressed toward the wall.

His knee came into contact with something hard and metallic. He struck a match, and saw that he had found a chain, one end of which was attached to a massive leg-iron, and the other secured to an eye-bolt sunk into the wall. The shank of the eye-bolt was badly corroded where it entered the masonry. A few minutes of wrenching and tugging sufficed to separate the chain from its anchorage. The result was a crude flail which in a strong hand could shatter whatever skull it struck.

Farrell was armed again, and his spirits rose accordingly.

He retraced his course and crept down the passageway toward the light. As he

halted in the shelter of a jamb he saw that the vault ahead of him was illuminated by a glowing brazier; and the scene gave him a foretaste of what his own fate might be.

The black, oily form of a muscular negro crouched beside the brazier. The bellows in his hands wheezed from his vigorous efforts to fan the charcoal fire to a white heat. Tongs or other long-handled implements projected from the incandescent mass.

Limned in harsh highlight and black shadows Farrell saw two white-robed Ismailians whose predatory, Semitic features were stern from the contemplation of their task. Both were armed with simitars and pistols. The object of their scrutiny was a man who sat crouched by a pilaster. Farrell could distinguish no features beyond the aquiline curve of his nose, and the black, spade-shaped beard. The hands, clasped about the knees, were fettered at the wrists.

"God!" muttered Farrell as the red glow became a dazzling whiteness. "That lad sitting there looks for all the world like an innocent bystander. Either that party isn't for him, or he has more guts than any ten men I've ever seen. . . . I've not been here long enough for that to be my reception committee. . . ."

Farrell appraised the situation, and gaged the distance between his lurking-place and the group at the brazier.

"Too far! They'd get wise before I got within striking distance . . . now if this piece of chain were only a solid bar so that I could slug, swat, and parry instead of having to use it like a whip . . . now what?"

The taller of the Ismailians glanced up, and with a gesture indicated the ceiling. Farrell could not distinguish his words, but it was evident that he had addressed the negro, who set aside his bellows, picked up a length of thin rope, and rose.

Then Farrell understood. They were going to slip the cord through a ring in the low ceiling, lash the prisoner's ankles, and suspend him so that the white-hot irons could be applied without interference from the victim's agonized writhing.

"Missed my chance!" growled Farrell. "They were all off guard, and I could have cold-calked them! Too late, now."

The Ismailian on the right addressed the prisoner; but the other was looking in Farrell's direction, though not directly at his lurking-place. The negro was shifting the implements that projected from the bed of coals.

Then Farrell tested the idea that came to him an instant after his expression of disgust. He reached into his pocket and found a large silver coin the size of an American dollar. He sent it spinning across the vault. It struck the opposite wall and tinkled to the floor.

As the Ismailian at the left of the group started, caught the gleam of silver, and stooped to pick it up, Farrell, whirling his flail, leaped from cover and charged.

THE startled cry of the crouching negro was simultaneous with the impact of the swinging fetter against the skull of the stooping enemy. The massive circlet of iron crunched home as the other white-robed enemy whirled from confronting his prisoner and drew a pistol. Farrell knew that he could not lash out with a second blow of his flail. He ducked as the pistol flashed, gripped the Ismailian's wrist as the pistol cracked again, and back-heeled him. They crashed to the flags, Farrell striving to keep the pistol out of effective action and to disable his enemy before the giant

negro recovered his wits enough to overwhelm him.

With a fierce wrench, Farrell disarmed the Ismailian and sent the pistol flying against the wall. And then the negro took a hand. They pounded and crushed Farrell as they sought to drive home with knife-thrusts which he evaded in his struggles to drive in with boot or knee. He finally, thrashing about, seized the shackle end of his flail; and as the Ismailian's knife darted in, Farrell jabbed the ponderous iron to the enemy's jaw with a crushing blow.

Then the negro crushed Farrell to the paving. Farrell's struggles were futile; the cumulative effect of previous combats was telling. In another moment his breath would be completely cut off by those relentless black hands. . . .

Then an agonized yell, and the stench of burning hair and flesh. The pressure relaxed as a shower of white-hot charcoal rained from the frenzied enemy and seared Farrell's hands and face. But the respite, though brief, sufficed. Farrell's boot laid the enemy out flat.

Then he rose, recovered the pistol that lay against the wall, and turned to confront the fettered prisoner.

"Fortunately," said the prisoner, "I was able to reach the tongs and flip that brazier into the party."

The mutual benefactors regarded each other a moment.

"Monsieur," began Farrell, recognizing the prisoner as a Frenchman, "I am more interested in getting out of here than exchanging compliments. Judging from the preparations I interrupted, you were in for a pleasant evening, morning, or whatever it may be."

"Unfortunately," came the reply, "these fetters are rivetted, and none of the tools they brought——"

"I'll tend to that," assured Farrell. He turned and set the brazier right side up, then with the tongs collected the still glowing charcoal, and fanned it once more to a white heat. "Get your chains hot enough," he explained, "and we can break them by hand."

"Magnifique!" Then, regarding Farrell more intently, "But I don't recognize you as any of the Brethren who might be kindly disposed—though those fellows lying on the floor prove the case."

"I'm not quite what I seem," admitted Farrell as he arranged the chains so that they could get the full heat of the brazier. Then, staring for an instant at the prisoner and at the device engraved on the emerald set in his massive ring, Farrell hazarded a guess that seemed warranted by the absence of the host who had issued the invitations to the *soirée* at the château.

"Are you by any chance the Marquis——"

"C'est moi! Des Islots, and everlastingly at your service!" The saturnine features brightened for a moment.

As Farrell pumped the bellows, he wondered at the fortuitous meeting.

"Did Hassan put you in here?"

"No. Shirkuh, his second in command, arranged this. Hassan is too busy to bother with details——"

"He had plenty of time for me," countered Farrell.

"Hmmm . . . then Shirkuh must be occupied with some important mission," began the Marquis.

"The *late* Shirkuh," corrected Farrell with a grim smile.

"Sacré bleu!" ejaculated the Marquis. "Did you——"

"I have the honor—and pleasure," admitted Farrell.

"Thank God! He was my evil genius. Years ago, in Syria, I joined the Ismail-

ians as an Associate. I was a student of the occult, you understand. Their aim at the time was harmless enough: the overthrow of Islam, and the pursuit of mystic speculations. For centuries the order has had no secular significance, you comprehend.

"I advanced to the rank of Initiate, then returned to France and organized a thaumaturgical society which was to carry on with the researches I had made in Syria, and in High Asia. And this was all well until fellow Ismailians came to Bayonne, one by one, and ended by converting the thaumaturgical society into a chapter of Ismailians.

"Shirkuh was the chief of these, a prior. And then they reverted to the tactics of the Twelfth Century. To augment the *hasheeshin* that they sent over, they recruited cutthroats from the underworld of Paris. Various actresses and women of the *demi-monde* were led to believe that they had been admitted as Associates, and were set to work as spies.

"There is a plot even now under way which, if successful, will upset the French colonial empire and end in a *jihad* that will stir up the entire Moslem world.

"Another chapter has been organized in Lyons, with a prior in charge; and Hassan is Grand Prior of France, acknowledging only the supreme chief in Damascus.

"At all events, when I saw the political aspect of the Ismailians who had gained their foothold through my thaumaturgical society, I protested to Shirkuh—and here I am. Hot irons and other pleasant devices were to make my end most colorful."

"Where," wondered Farrell, "does La Dorada fit into the picture?"

"Eh? La Dorada? Why, a sort of chief female spy—she is friendly with many high officers and civilian dignitaries, you comprehend. She is——"

"Was," interrupted Farrell. "Three assassins finished her."

"Diable!" exclaimed the Marquis. He was amazed rather than grieved.

"You take it calmly, for a lover," remarked Farrell.

"Lover?" The Marquis laughed sourly. "I, her lover? Camouflage, to account for her presence down here, and along the Riviera. As to her being assassinated, that is easily explained: her mission must have been completed. So she was killed to insure her continued secrecy, and also to warn her dupes that they would follow suit if they relented or weakened in the course dictated by Hassan. And that move makes it all the more conclusive that France is due for an explosion."

The confusion was being untangled. Farrell wondered at Antoinette Delatour's connection, and the source of the dreams that had haunted her; but the chains that bound the Marquis were white-hot and ready to break, so that conversation would have to wait.

"All right, heave!" directed Farrell.

The chains parted.

THEY stripped the bodies of the white-robed Ismailians, and armed themselves with their simitars and pistols, as well as taking the extra cartridges that studded one of the belts. And the keys that had admitted the executioners completed the equipment. As the hot ends of the chain cooled, the Marquis bound them to his limbs so that they would not clank.

"I wonder," said Farrell as they turned toward the iron-bound door, "if those lads are completely out."

"Cordieu! But I am absent-minded!" growled the Marquis. He drew the simitar at his side.

As Farrell unlocked the door, he heard the sword-strokes that assured beyond all doubt that three more had entered *al janat*.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Farrell as the door closed behind them. "We may run into a detachment on the way down here to finish me. Do you know of any other way except the passage used by your executioners?"

The Marquis reflected for a moment as he wiped and sheathed his blade.

"I do," he replied. "But we'd stand a good chance of getting lost and perishing in a labyrinth. This network is older than the Roman occupation. We have reclaimed but a fraction of it. It is the sanctuary of some awful, prehistoric past. And there were living proofs. . . ." The Marquis shuddered at the recollection of what he had seen. "We killed most of them. But—as for me, I prefer to face men like ourselves! Anyway, if Shirkuh is dead, Hassan will be busy until another Prior is appointed. Shirkuh was an adept who studied in Tibet. A necromancer——"

Farrell shivered, and as they advanced up the passageway, told the Marquis what he had seen at the château.

"Canaille!" muttered the Marquis. "The night I was imprisoned! Just like him. And as you suspect, enough assassins in the crowd to spread the rumor of his miracle.

"Our best chance," he resumed, "is to go to the vault where you saw Hassan unveiled, thence to the assembly hall of the assassins. Then cut our way out—if we can! The chances are slender——"

"How about passing by the Garden?" wondered Farrell.

"Out of our way," protested the Marquis. "But why?"

"A . . . friend," replied Farrell. "Mademoiselle Delatour——"

"What?" exclaimed the Marquis with a start. *"Dieu de Dieu!* How——"

Then he controlled his agitation, beckoned for silence.

They emerged from the darkness and turned into an upward-sloping branch passage illuminated by torches thrust into sconces on the wall. Ahead of them they heard the measured tread of a sentry walking his post.

"Hang back," whispered the Marquis as he fingered the hilt of the broad-bladed knife that kept his simitar company. "I know the passwords. And he may not know I'm a prisoner—but be ready for trouble if he does!"

The sentry challenged the Marquis. There was an exchange of sign and countersign. Then as the sentry saluted, the Marquis' right hand flashed to the right; his body jerked forward. As Farrell advanced, he saw the sentry collapse and sprawl across the tiles in a grotesque heap.

"So far, so good," muttered the Marquis as he wiped his blade, and led the way.

A barred door yielded to the Marquis' touch on a concealed lever. They continued on their upward march. They halted finally before a door whose panels were of heavy and elaborately carved woodwork.

"Diable!" growled the Marquis as he tried the door. "Barred from the other side. The release this side does not help us."

The mutter of drums and the plucked strings of a *sitar* were plainly audible.

"Better wait until the place is vacant," whispered the Marquis. "And in the meanwhile, let's cut a loophole and see what's happening."

They drew their knives and set to work.

PEERING through the loophole, Farrell could see the arched niche from whose foot he had been precipitated into the dungeon below. Hassan was again, or perhaps still, at his post. He was veiled, but there was no mistaking the posture and the expression of the eyes.

Sitting cross-legged along the curved wall of the vault were a score of Ismailians in white ceremonial robes. They wore white turbans, scarlet slippers, and belts of the same color: and all were armed with the richly adorned simitars suitable to a formal assembly.

A group of musicians squatted on the floor, along the coping of the circular pool, whose dark water reflected the spectral glow that pervaded the vault. The wind instruments joined the music with a demoniac sobbing and moaning, and a brazen gong clanged.

Four litter-bearers emerged from an entrance. Attendants followed them, bearing tripods of bronze. Farrell shuddered at the similarity of that scene to the horrible beauty of the resurrection of La Dorada. Then he noted that the figure on the litter was that of a man.

As the shroud was lifted, he recognized Shirkuh of the clan of Shadi. The Prior of the Ismailians was to receive the final homage of his subordinates. The pipes wailed mournfully in honor of that desecrator of the dead. Farrell sighed with relief, and glanced at the Marquis.

He peered once more through the loophole.

"Good God!" he gasped in dismay.

Four more litter-bearers were filing into the vault, and after them came attendants with tripods. The tiny feet and the feminine curves that the shroud revealed unmistakably betokened a woman's body.

Farrell's cheeks whitened beneath their stain as he caught the glint of red-gold hair.

An attendant stripped the brocaded shroud from the body.

Antoinette Delatour, sleeping—or dead.

With an inarticulate growl of rage, Farrell gathered himself to charge the door with his shoulder. But the hand of the Marquis gripping his arm restrained him.

"Wait!" whispered the Marquis. "It is hopeless, now. But later—stand fast. I will tell you—you see, I am acquainted——"

Farrell stared somberly at his companion. He saw that the Marquis' face was white and that his eyes flamed with wrath. The hand on Farrell's arm trembled.

"All right," he conceded. He wondered at the Marquis' incoherence and agitation in excess of what he would expect of a right-minded gentleman. He gained assurance from the Marquis' apparent knowledge of what was to be; but with it came the dread of some new peak of horror.

"Great God!" muttered Farrell, remembering once more the necromantic ritual at the château. "Is she——" Then, in a flare of rage and grief, "I'm going through!"

"Restrain yourself!" commanded the Marquis. "I know."

Farrell shook his head, and turned to the loophole.

The attendants and the litter-bearers were filing out of the vault.

The Grand Prior, Hassan, rose from his cushions.

"Brethren and servants of the Seventh Imam," he began, "your Prior, the learned Shirkuh, has crossed the Border. He who could raise the dead can not resurrect himself. But we, *inshallah*, can send a courier to lead him back to us."

As his upraised hand dropped to his side, a monstrous peal of bronze echoed and reverberated through the vault. The assembled Ismailians stirred, and corrected their posture, so that their feet and hands were placed with ritual precision. Even their features assumed a oneness of expression: an intent, solemn stare. The silence became absolute. The musicians sat motionless, awaiting the signal to sound off.

The Grand Prior nodded.

The single-stringed violins, the moaning pipes and the purring drums wove a harmony that sighed and sobbed like a fallen angel bewailing his lost estate. The great gong pealed with mighty, brazen reverberations. Acolytes filed into the vault, and paced in cadence to the music, and rhythmically swung fuming censers as they passed thrice in procession about the dead, and the exquisite unclad beauty of the living woman. And as the acolytes retreated, Hassan descended from his dais.

He drew on the floor with a piece of chalk a circle several paces in diameter, and within it a pentacle. Each of the five points he marked with cabalistical symbols. Then with a ceremonious gesture he summoned three Initiates from among those who sat waiting beside the dais. Each Initiate took his post at his assigned station; then all four bowed to the fifth vertex and the Presence that was to be summoned.

Hassan intoned a sentence; and the Initiates, beginning at his left, each in turn chanted a line of the invocation. Those without the circle solemnly pronounced a fifth sonorous phrase.

"For the vacant corner," whispered the Marquis to Farrell. "They are representing the One they are calling to occupy the fifth angle."

And thus they continued their prodigious utterances, four verses riming in succession, with the surge and thunder of the unrimed, antiphonal response from without. Each time the circle was completed, the riming syllable changed; and from the Arabic with which they had started, they shifted to Himyaric, and then to obscure, antique tongues whose sound was an elemental roar of deep gutturals. Then finally came a primal, bestial murmuring and muttering, a chirping and clucking of the tongues that were spoken by those who wandered through the Void before the first man walked the earth. And recurring through the entire progression was a portentous name that is seldom pronounced above a whisper.

The very features of the Initiates changed as they pronounced those rustling, shivering syllables. They were achieving a unity with that which crept and crawled and loathsomely slunk through chaos and reviled the unborn stars, and mocked the light that was to be. . . .

FARRELL, staring now with a dread that obliterated every other emotion, saw that a Presence was materializing at the fifth vertex. A vibrant glow like the luminous vapor of a mercury arc was momentarily becoming more dense and substantial. Lambent flames played about the brows of the Initiates in the pentacle. A terrific tension pervaded the vault. The bluish glow became deeper, and was shot with flashes of crimson and yellowish green. Each drawn face was now a ghastly slate-gray: the Presence at the fifth vertex was drawing the living essence from the swaying, gesturing bodies of Hassan and his trio of Initiates.

The Presence took human form: a lordly, satanic visage and a magnificently muscled body that quivered and throbbed to the droning chant. Then, rich and

clear as a god calling across the wastes of space, the Presence began declaiming:

"*Al Asfarani! Al Asfarani! Al Asfarani!* I come from the realm of fire to command you! I have come out of the depths! Harken! Harken! Harken! *Al Asfarani!* Golden One! Step forth from your body and walk into the darkness among those whose bread is dust! Walk among the lonely dead and seek Shirkuh! Call him by his name and take him by the hand! Guide him from the shadows and into the morning!"

The unconscious woman shuddered at the sound of that mighty voice. She made a despairing gesture as if to resist the command that came from the fifth vertex. Then she relaxed.

The Presence continued his prodigious chant. Even the brazen reverberation of the gongs was drowned by his awful utterance.

A thin streamer, like the thread of smoke rising from an almost-quenched altar flame, rose from Antoinette Delatour's half-parted lips.

"*Cordieu!*" shouted the Marquis in Farrell's ear. "They're doing it!"

His gestures rather than his voice stirred Farrell to action. They retreated, then charged crashing against the door. It resisted the shock. Farrell drew his simitar and hacked at the tropical hardwood. A carven panel splintered.

"Good God! Look!" he yelled in despair.

The Presence was now towering toward the ceiling. It was bending over like a monstrous serpent in human form, arching and writhing, reaching as though over some invisible wall, making passes and gestures over the silver-white body of Antoinette.

The Initiates in the pentacle were paper-white. They swayed to the cadence of that great voice whose concussion was now making the very vault tremble.

The train of smoke-like vapor that emerged from Antoinette's lips was becoming more dense, and hovered over her body like a veil.

"Quick!" shouted the Marquis, as they frantically hacked the stout wood. "Hold them, while I exorcise the Presence!"

The door was reinforced with iron rods that bound it together. Their blades were nicked and saw-toothed from the fierce assault.

"Again!" cried the Marquis as his simitar flashed home.

A chunk of the hardwood tore loose from its severed reinforcement. They shouldered through, torn and cut by the splinters and the ragged ends of the rods they had hacked.

A musician cried out and sprang to his feet. And then one of the Initiates who sat beside the dais saw Farrell and the Marquis as they dashed across the circular vault. He aroused his comrades from their fascinated contemplation of the invocation of which they were now accessories rather than principals. They started as from a deep sleep, stared for an instant, then drew their simitars and charged to meet the intruders, and to protect the left flank of the pentacle, from which the Presence still leaned over the unconscious girl, intoning the mighty commands that would send her across the Border.

Shoulder to shoulder, Farrell and the Marquis met the assault with deliberate, deadly pistol fire. The attack was checked; but the enemy stood fast and firm, protecting the pentacle. And despite the hail of lead they had poured into the ranks of the Ismailians, Farrell and his ally were still outnumbered ten to one.

The musicians were salvaging weapons.

There was not enough time to reload the pistols. The Ismailians had recovered from the shock of their murderous reception, and seeing their advantage, leaped forward, blades ready.

Then a clash of steel, and a red mill of slaughter. The Marquis fought with vengeful desperation. He wove in and out, sidestepping and parrying, shearing and slaying. And Farrell, keeping at his side, carved a gory path into the enemy. He fought with a blind, unreasoning fury, seeking to hack his way through the press and clear a road for the Marquis who could cope with that monstrous Presence that was in thunderous tones chanting the life and vital essence from Antoinette.

The enemy, sensing that the Marquis was the keystone of the arch, concentrated their attack on him; and despite his exquisite swordsmanship, he was being slashed to pieces by a desperation and force that discounted his skill.

He sank once beneath a whirlwind of blades, and recovered under the shelter of Farrell's blade; but he was coughing blood from a deep wound.

And Hassan and his trio had left the pentacle. The Presence, now endowed with the power borrowed from all that the Initiates had conjured from across the Border, was self-sustaining and no longer needed its portion of human vitality.

Hassan, behind the line of the assault, directed his Initiates in the attack.

"Cut him down, O sons of flat-nosed mothers!" he cried, as he saw the Marquis recover and press forward.

But that magnificent last effort burned out. With a cry of mortal rage, the Marquis lashed out with a final, devastating stroke, then collapsed on a heap of slain.

"Finish!" despaired Farrell. He was doomed, and Antoinette also—even though he could cut his way out. An adept was required to exorcise that terrific Presence that was drawing her from her body.

But the enemy, instead of closing in to hew him to pieces, gaped stupidly, then yelled in terror. They were staring at something at his right, and to the rear. He glanced over his shoulder, compelled by the consternation that stopped them where they stood.

FARRELL lowered his own point, himself struck with awe. He recalled what the Marquis had said about the denizens of that labyrinth of passages.

A monstrous, amorphous thing had emerged from the circular pool into which Hassan had ordered the dead *fedawi* to be flung. It was misshapen, and grotesque in its vague semblance to humanity. Its bulbous head had a single, circular eye the size of a saucer. It glittered glassily in the bluish, spectral light. The limbs were shapeless and ponderous, and it lumbered, dripping wet, across the tiles. Its feet fell with a metallic clank, and its breath hissed and wheezed.

A second and similar creature was emerging from the water, even as the first advanced with slow, laborious pace. The hand clutched a short iron bar.

The bar rose in a sweeping arc and crunched down on the skull of an Ismailian, spattering blood and brain in a shower. The second monster clambered over the coping, unlimbered a bludgeon, and with gruesome deliberation picked a victim and struck.

There was a moment of silence unbroken save for the wheezing breath of the creatures from the pit. Then the Ismailians yelled in mortal terror. They forgot Farrell with his dripping blade and bewildered eyes; they forgot the Marquis, who stirred, and strove to lash out once more with his red simitar; they

forgot the golden-haired girl, and the malevolent Presence that, now silent, throbbed and pulsed, an aggregate of quivering, electric-bluish cold fire.

They broke and fled toward the splintered door.

At the height of their panic, Farrell understood. The monsters were men in diving-suits.

The Marquis was down. Farrell could not himself thwart that monster that was drinking Antoinette's vital essence and taking her across the Border beyond recall; but he could slay until he dropped from wounds, or from weariness of slaughter. He hurdled the hedge of fallen Ismailians and with a cry of rage and grief joined his allies to exact vengeance.

A third diver was at that moment emerging from the pool and joining the assault against the frenzied enemy, striking them down with remorseless precision as they struggled to crowd through the splintered panel of the door that had given Farrell admittance.

Farrell, however, was not the only one whose wits had recovered from the terror inspired by the apparitions from the black pool.

"Back and face them, *ya mumineen!*" shouted Hassan. "They are men like ourselves!"

But his attempt to rally his men was vain. Those who abandoned their efforts to crowd through the jammed door, and circled around to escape by way of the opposite entrance, were blocked by the arrival of a file of *fedawi* who, knives drawn, had come running from the assembly hall.

The dripping revolvers that the divers drew as they discarded their grappling-irons crackled and flamed, pouring a deadly fire into the new center of action.

Then Farrell conceived the desperate device of capturing Hassan and forcing him to recall the elemental monster that was drinking Antoinette's life. He leaped forward, cutting and slashing his way through the few who interposed.

"We meet in Paradise, *ya mumineen!*" Hassan shouted, seeing that the day was lost. And before Farrell could seize him, Hassan released the trap-door before the dais and dropped into the vault below.

The last hope was gone. Pursuit through those subterranean mazes would be futile. As Farrell turned from the yawning trap that had allowed the arch-enemy to escape, the rage of slaughter left him. The crackle of pistols died out. He saw that the circular chamber was cleared of all but the dead and wounded Ismailians. The divers, handicapped by their heavy suits, could not carry out an effective pursuit of the survivors of their deadly fire.

Weary and despairing, Farrell nerved himself to confront the diabolical creature that was drawing Antoinette across the border. He turned——

The Marquis des Islots was raising his hacked, bleeding body from a heap of slain. He tottered, swayed, then advanced toward the lambent flame-presence. Farrell stared in fascination as that gory wreck of a man advanced, making ritual gestures with his faltering hands, and muttering in a low voice.

The Presence was shrinking and dimming, and that shimmering exhalation from Antoinette's lips was being retracted. The Marquis sustained himself with will alone. He staggered, sank—Farrell's heart sank with him—he recovered, stepped forward again, still gesticulating and murmuring. The Presence leaned forward to confront him, and menaced him with its remaining energy, seeking to outlive the dying adept.

The Marquis' bleeding, gashed face was drawn and white; his eyes were fixed

and staring. He achieved another pass; then he collected himself, paused, and instead of murmuring, thundered a final phrase of command.

The Presence vanished; and the last vestige of grayish, luminous haze disappeared between Antoinette's lips.

Farrell leaped forward in time to catch the Marquis as he collapsed.

THE divers, returning from the farther entrance at which the Ismailians had made their last stand, lifted one another's domed helmets. Then, grimy and exultant, Pierre d'Artois and the two members of the *Sûreté* gathered about Farrell and the Marquis, who was regaining a little of his strength.

"*Messieurs,*" he said, as he gestured toward Antoinette, "she is safe. She will presently awaken. It can not return. *Jamais!* . . . It was my fault . . . in the beginning . . . but this infamy was not my intent. . . . I loved her, but she rejected me . . . persistently. And for revenge . . . and to break her spirit . . . I administered without her knowledge a compound . . . of hypnotic drugs . . . so that she and that Syrian girl would each night exchange bodies . . . then Hassan took a hand. . . ."

He regarded d'Artois for a moment.

"You, *monsieur,* doubtless understand——" Then, to Farrell, "But this last infamy . . . was not mine—Shirkuh and Hassan—I tried to make . . . amends——"

For an instant Farrell regarded the dying man with revulsion. Then he saw the remorse on the drawn, blood-splashed features, and thought of the Marquis' last gallant stand, confronting and exorcising that diabolical presence from beyond the Border.

"Stout fellow," he muttered, as he grasped the Marquis' hand.

"*C'est fini,*" murmured d'Artois a moment later. "Magnificent in his death as he was misguided in his life . . . dying on his feet, he had the will to conquer, and make restitution."

Then d'Artois rose and glanced about him.

"Do you know the way out of here?"

"Through that door," directed Farrell. "He told me, before we made our rush."

"*Messieurs,*" suggested d'Artois, "be ready with your pistols, should any of these assassins be lingering. I will take charge of the young lady, and you, my friend, lead the way. *Monsieur le Marquis* perhaps deserves greater courtesy, but we can not carry his body and take the risk of being caught without weapons drawn and ready."

Farrell led the way. Without much difficulty, he found the passage that opened into the vault where he had lain while regaining his consciousness preliminary to submitting to Hassan's tests. And from there they finally emerged in the heart of the citadel. A few moments later Farrell and d'Artois, carrying Antoinette, met Raoul where he was waiting at the wheel of the Renault.

9. *D'Artois Is Envious*

ANTOINETTE, an hour later, was entirely herself.

"Oh, it's wonderful to be out of that awful garden," she said, and curled herself up in the depth of a large, upholstered chair. "And now that *Monsieur le Médicin* admits that I'm as good as new, you might satisfy my curiosity on a few points. How did you ever——"

She glanced up at Farrell, who had seated himself on the arm of her chair. He was not yet through convincing himself that Satan's Garden was a thing of the past, and insisted on keeping Antoinette within arm's reach.

"Suppose you ask Pierre," he said.

D'Artois laughed.

"After all, *mon vieux,* you were responsible. We found two bodies floating down the Nive. One of them wore —oh, very becomingly, I assure you!— a knife in his stomach. The *Sûreté* informed me. I identified the knife. It was one of mine, which you had taken from my collection to wear while disguised as Ibrahim the Afghan ruffian.

"'*Alors,*' said I, 'Ibrahim Khan has given good account of himself. Perhaps, but God forbid, his own body will follow. I assure you that we watched with anxiety. But no further signs. At low tide, however—you know, the Nive rises and falls with the tide, since we're so close to the sea—we found another body, mainly as the result of our continued close watch for yours. This one was wedged near the central of the seven bridges. We investigated, and found an uncharted drain of considerable diameter.

"'*Mordieu,*' said I to *Monsieur* the Prefect, 'if bodies came out, bodies can also go in.' We got diving-suits. The tide in the meanwhile rose, but we had the location well marked. We advanced up the drain until we came to a dead end. Even before we left the water we heard the clash and crackle of your skirmish——"

"Massacre, you mean," interpolated Farrell, grinning as much as his bandages permitted. "Not a second too soon."

"*Eh bien,* we shut our exhaust airvalves and thus rose to the surface. Our grappling-irons snagged to the coping helped us unaided over the top. Then we sliced our airlines and lifelines, opened our exhausts and——"

"Scared them out of a week's growth!" added Farrell as d'Artois paused to light a cigarette. "But that damnable thing all of quivering fire—good Lord!"

"That," submitted d'Artois, "is something that I can explain but vaguely, if at all. I called it some more mummery, and decided, rather hastily, perhaps, that you and the Marquis needed help first of all. On reflection, and in view of some of your remarks since we left, I am of the opinion that it was either an elemental conjured up by those devil-mongering adepts, or else a wandering and malignant astral that was energized by the vital essence of the adepts, or perhaps by the vibration concentration of their ritual. *Monsieur le Marquis,* God rest his erring soul, could doubtless explain what it was, since he used his last spark of will to combat it and thwart its attempt to convert Mademoiselle Antoinette into—what did you tell me?—a courier to call Shirkuh from the hell in which he now must be roasting.

"I would very much relish," continued d'Artois, "questioning Hassan, who devised all that deviltry. But alas! he escaped. And while you, both of you, were causing the good doctor a certain amount of concern, I heard that the *Sûreté* and a handful of *gendarmes* cleaned out the entire nest. Unhappily, two were taken alive of that crew of assassins. And of course, those lovely ladies of the garden."

Farrell sighed from weariness and contentment, then grimaced from the ache of his wounds.

"The Marquis," he observed, "didn't have time to explain how that hypnotic drug enabled him to project Antoinette's *self* into the body of the Syrian bride of the garden — Lord, it's impossible to imagine how a brave fellow like him could have let his resentment and disappointment carry him to such lengths! Having her scourged by proxy, so to speak."

"Too much occultism and devil-mon-

gering upset his brilliant mind," replied d'Artois. "Somber, gloomy, and drunk with his talents. And translating Antoinette into the body of a bride of the garden, whom he could flog at will, was his warped expression of denied affection. As to just how he accomplished it, we can but surmise. Strange drugs are compounded in the Orient. When I complete the analysis of the pastries they offered us that night at the château, I may further enlighten you."

"But the stripes and welts that appeared on Antoinette's body?" wondered Farrell.

"For once you ask me something simple," retorted d'Artois. "Did you know that if a hypnotic is touched with a pencil, for example, and offered the suggestion that it is a red-hot iron, he will develop a blister, and all the symptoms of a burn at the spot touched? Moll and others concede that point with very little argument. It has often been experimentally demonstrated.

"*Alors,* the body of the Syrian girl was scourged. Antoinette's *self,* though in a borrowed body, retained what we can roughly call an astral connection with her own body; otherwise she could not have returned to it at the end of each ordeal. And through this connection, the body of Antoinette developed the same welts that were raised on the skin of the Syrian girl; just as, by rough analogy, the hypnotic subject through suggestion shows all outward signs of a burn. And the marks of the heavy anklets the Syrian bride of the garden wore were similarly branded on Antoinette's ankles.

"The Marquis during his unsuccessful courtship of Antoinette had ample opportunities to administer the hypnotic drug at which he hinted, so that his influence could have been gained without her knowledge. This, together with the objective symptoms, convinces me that if it was not the conventional hypnosis we know, it was at least a quasi-hypnosis. And as you know, there are vegetable compounds which, if properly administered, will effect a partial release of the astral counterpart of a body, or its spiritual essence. To pursue it to its origin would lead you to a study of Egyptian magic, and the nine traditional elements of every living human body.

"I will leave all this to you, *mon vieux,* to study, this matter of stigmata resulting from suggestion and other psychic influences. Me, I am no lecturer.

"And as to Antoinette's Arabic remarks in her sleep: the bride of the garden, dispossessed of her body for the time, sought Antoinette's. And by that astral connection which she retained with her own, she felt the scourgings administered in the garden, and expressed herself, through Antoinette's lips, as you heard."

D'Artois emerged from his chair and bowed with formal precision.

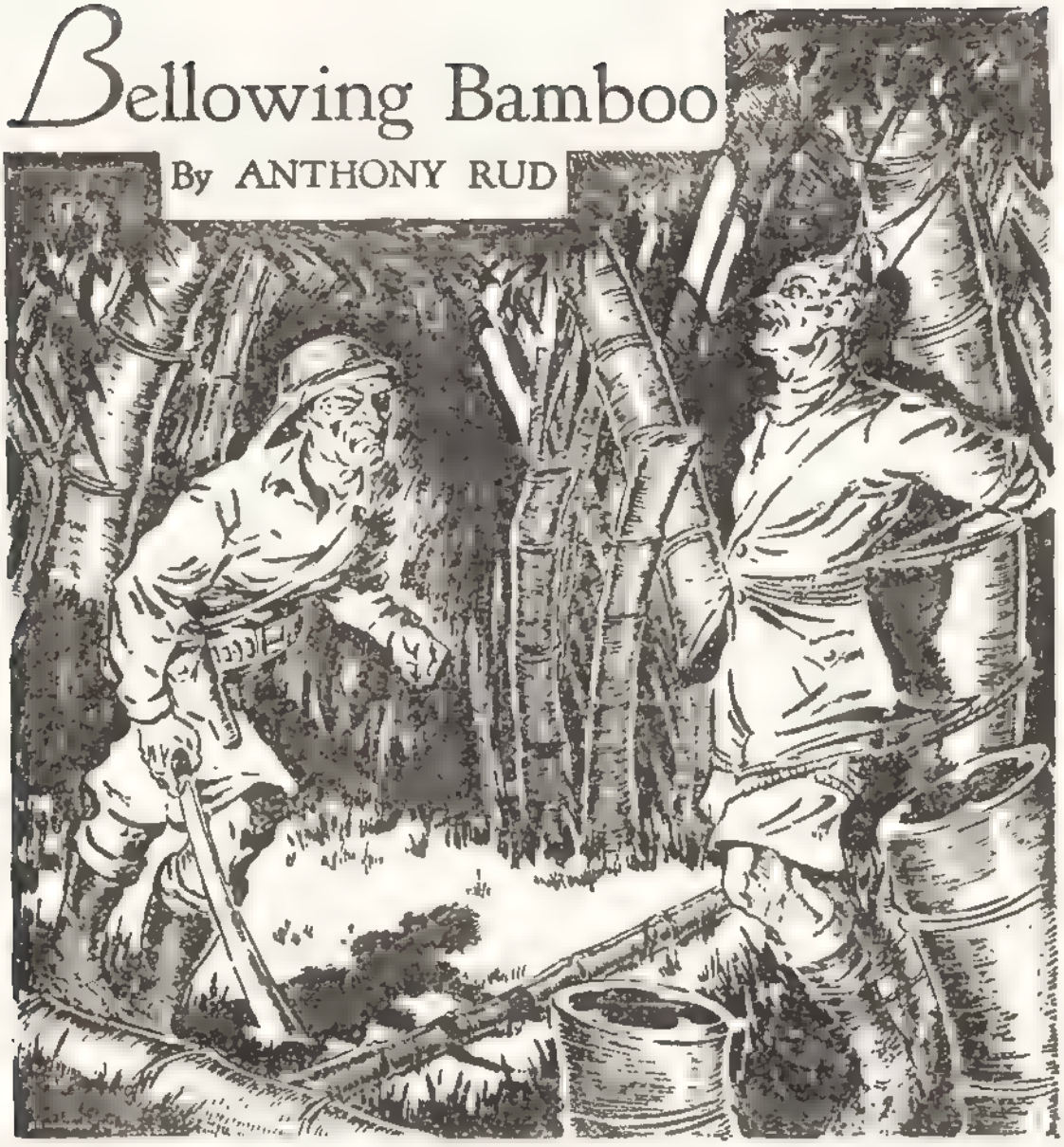
"I will therefore leave you here, my blundering Afghan, to have your wounds properly nursed while I go about doing all that an old man can do under the circumstances: envy you, and write a monograph on *Messieurs les Assassins,* and Satan's Garden, from which you so happily emerged."

With a peremptory gesture, he cut short Antoinette's insistence upon his pausing for at least a moment. Then, halting at the door, he concluded as he glanced at Farrell, "*Mordieu,* and to think that you enjoyed all that fine swordplay, while I, Pierre d'Artois, had to wear a diving-suit to find a fight, and then had to use a crowbar! In *several* ways I envy you."

[THE END]

Bellowing Bamboo

By ANTHONY RUD



"Inarticulate horror, choked screams burst from his throat."

The story of a weird revenge, and the unhuman bellow that came across the lake from an eery bamboo forest in the South American jungle

FROM the moment Lieutenant Natheshire of the British Guiana Provincial Police heard of Selwyn Landrigan's coming, the officer frowned and became moody. Still, as guardian of the peace on the upper Mazaruni and Cuyuni Rivers, Natheshire could do no less than make a pretense of welcoming Landrigan —and then stick close to him.

Landrigan was hated, with sufficient reason. In spite of that fact he had become a personage in the affairs of the trading company. And this company, which handled most of the foreign trade of British Guiana and Venezuela, and also owned more than a hundred stations on the jungle rivers, could make or break men like Natheshire.

In his secret thoughts, Natheshire feared that the pompous and foppish Landrigan was returning to be murdered. Not that anyone would mourn; but Natheshire sincerely liked the man who had reason to do the murder.

Lake Maza-Cuyuni is formed by the junction of these two swift jungle rivers, with the addition of the Essequibo. From the lake to the sea at Demerara, the more sluggish stream is called the Essequibo. On the lake itself, the British maintain a large and well-guarded prison colony, similar to the French penal colony at the Isles du Salut.

Directly across the ten-mile lake from the prison is a *shando* [tropical inn], which serves as a half-way house for white men. Natheshire had quarters here; and the company agents came here from the rivers, whenever the rain and mildew of the jungle got too much for them. This day three men sat at a small table on the screened gallery of the *shando*. Selwyn Landrigan was speaking, arrogantly as usual.

"The Cuyuni River station is the most important and profitable in all this jungle!" he stated, smoothing the glistening white silk stock at his neck. He drained the last of his tinkling rum swizzel, then set down the glass and nodded profoundly across at the younger of his listeners, Bisbee Alden.

The latter had been a sub-agent on Trinidad, and was going upstream from Lake Maza-Cuyuni on the morrow.

At Landrigan's left sat Natheshire, a tall, stern man. He was scowling a little over his drink, which was made of Holland's mixed with quinine water.

"I rather expected we would never see you upstream again, Landrigan," drawled the policeman, a cutting edge of criticism underlying the dry statement. He looked as if willing to amplify it, too.

Landrigan stiffened instantly.

"I am company manager for British Guiana now," he answered with hauteur. "Naturally I came to help Mr. Alden take charge of my old station. Also I have a few other matters of business. I suppose you refer to that uprising of the Indios? To that most unfortunate killing of Smith's young brother?"

"Quite," agreed Natheshire dryly. "To that—and to Smith himself."

"I shall make a point to see Mr. Smith before I return. He has an explanation to make to the company. Though I can appreciate why he might not care to live any longer in that bungalow among the bamboos, moving the station from the mouth of the Mazaruni clear up to the foot of the rapids—twenty-five miles—was absolutely unauthorized! I wish to know why."

He pushed back his chair, preparatory to arising.

"I would advise against it," said Natheshire, deadly serious now. "It is my job to keep peace in the jungle."

"Wha-at?" gasped Landrigan. "You actually mean that Smith threatens me—through you?"

"Nothing so absurd!" retorted Natheshire bruskly. "No, sit down a moment!" —this as the manager moved as if to retire to his bedchamber in the rear of the *shando*.

This was the voice of authority, of the British law. Landrigan scowled, hesitated, but finally obeyed. He was furious at this insult to his self-importance, occurring as it did before his new subordinate.

"THERE never will be any love lost between you and me," continued Natheshire sternly then. "That is why I prefer to have you hear what I have to say to Mr. Alden. He is to have charge of the station which deals directly with

those Indios who slew Smith's crippled kid brother, whom he idolized—the Cuyuni Mundurucus.

"Alden will find that branch of the tribe somewhat diminished in numbers—and prone to stay closely within their stockaded village at night. And, Mr. Alden, this is why!

"I must digress a moment to make my point plain. This region, and all the Mud Coast from Demerara to Georgetown, was originally colonized by the Dutch from Java, back in the early Seventeenth Century. They cleared three hundred and more square miles of jungle right away, and planted cassava. In the course of fifty years they had two thousand miles in cultivation. That's all gone back to jungle, except right near the coast.

"They brought fruits and Asiatic bamboo with them from the East. All we have now are a few durians, and that forest of bamboo, over there where the Mazaruni empties into this lake. That is the only *Asiatic* bamboo forest in the Americas, though there are many indigenous varieties.

"The Dutch brought ten thousand or more East Indian coolies to use as laborers. Their descendants still work the cane and cassava plantations near the coast. The point is, they gave some of their queer Eastern beliefs to the Indios—especially one which had to do with decapitation with the parang, or with the Collins machete. The Mundurucus were head-hunters anyway. Still are. They bone and shrivel their enemies' heads for trophies. So they took to Malay superstitions of this sort with alacrity.

"For the last century or so, I understand, these Indios from the Cuyuni have brought their important captives down to this bamboo grove on the lake. They have had a pleasant custom of binding the captive to the stalk of a giant bamboo, then beheading him.

"One stroke of the machete cuts through the victim's neck, and also through the thin, hard, hollow bamboo bole. Strangely enough, the bamboo utters a bellow or yowl, like a single blast of air through a shattered organ pipe. You can hear it quite plainly from the gallery of this *shando*."

"Ugh!" shivered Bisbee Alden, smiling uneasily. "Pleasant natives I'm going to handle!" But he was young enough not to seem really displeased.

Natheshire nodded grimly. "That bellow, or whatever you want to call it, is supposed to be the victim's soul, fleeing to Paradise," he continued. "In the bamboo grove you will find eight stumps, new in the course of the past year.

"There were exactly nine Indios concerned in the murder of Smith's young brother. Nine Indios—*and one white man!*"

His face was grimly stern as he spoke the two concluding sentences straight at Selwyn Landrigan.

"Good Lord!" began Bisbee Alden aghast. "You mean that Smith——?"

The sentence died on his lips. From diagonally across the mirror-quiet, moonlit lake came a sudden sound which widened the eyes of all three white men, and made them grasp involuntarily at the arms of their wicker chairs.

It was a single mournful bellow, indescribably suggestive and blood-chilling.

Natheshire took a deep inhalation, and his dark eyes narrowed.

"That's likely number nine!" he said, getting up and reaching for his holstered Browning, hung by a belt from the back of his chair. "I'll wager I find the body —*but not the head!*"

"You—you——" sputtered Landrigan, leaping to his feet. He was white of

face, more from fury than fear, however. Then his words spilled out fast.

"You mean to stand there and admit, Lieutenant Natheshire," he snapped, "that you have allowed nine murders in this district where you say you keep the peace? And also, you offer gratuitous insult to company officials who come here upon their legitimate business?

"I shall go to my room, and write out a report of your insolence and inefficiency, tonight! Perhaps your superiors will have something to say about this!"

Natheshire finished buckling his belt. Then he grimaced as at something distasteful.

"Report and be damned!" he said in a level tone, and went forth into the night.

Two hours later young Bisbee Alden still lay awake. He heard the policeman returning from his grim task, and stepped out into the dimness of the gallery.

"Find what you expected, Lieutenant?" he asked, wondering at the quiver of excitement in his voice.

"Yes, one of your Cuyunis," said Natheshire. "I expect he will be the last—*Indio!* There's no evidence I could discover by flashlight. I'll go out and make a thorough examination in the morning."

He stepped on past the new agent, entered his own quarters and speedily retired. He guessed well enough who had beheaded the native, a murderous rascal who had been one of the raiding nine of whom he had spoken. But in this particular case Lieutenant Natheshire was apt to be an obtuse Sherlock Holmes. This was the jungle, after all. And Natheshire sympathized deeply with the man named Smith.

Bisbee Alden had difficulty controlling the tingly chills which skittered across his shoulder-blades. Good land alive, what a job he had undertaken! After peaceful Trinidad, it was like being plunged into another world. For a second he glanced down at the end of the *shando*, where bright light in cross-bars fell from the lattice of Landrigan's window. No doubt the manager was still scribbling his vitriolic report.

Alden shrugged, ashamed of a momentary impulse to chuck the job. He went to his room and determinedly lay down. This time he slept.

One hour later a man came noiselessly from the jungle. He showed only as a tall shadow, striding swiftly toward the stilted gallery. Without a sound he mounted the steps, let himself in the screen door, and then stopped outside the lattice of Landrigan's window.

There he crouched, peering in. The barred light gave him as a tall man, spare but sinewy. He was clad in cap, flannel shirt, khaki trousers and sneakers—the fatigue uniform of the jungle trader, used when at home, or when travelling in country not infested with fer-de-lances and bushmasters. A wide leather cartridge-belt holding a holstered Colt automatic encircled his waist.

Ten, twelve seconds ticked past. Inside the lighted room, Landrigan signed his name with a scratchy flourish. Then he got to his feet, stretching cramped muscles. He shook one fist in the general direction of Natheshire's room. The arrogant manager looked vindictively pleased with himself.

Five seconds later a slight sound made him turn. Then a shudder of surprize and apprehension convulsed Landrigan. A tall, bleak-featured man with levelled automatic stood in the open door to the gallery.

"S-smith!" the manager whispered, his eyes wide and apprehensively staring. He

had meant to call Smith on the carpet, but not in this manner. No, indeed!

"Not another sound if you wish to live, Landrigan!" warned Smith, in a ghost-voice which would not carry more than ten feet. "You are coming with me. Any noise, I warn you, will be your *last* noise on earth! Take off your shoes, and carry them."

"Wha-what does this mean?" stammered Landrigan.

"Not another word! Come!"

There was no sign of yielding or compromise in the stern, gaunt face behind the automatic. Landrigan thought irrelevantly to himself that Smith looked ten years older; that he still clung to his absurd habit of shaving daily. . . .

A MINUTE later, shoes in hand, and shivering despite the warmth of the night, Landrigan preceded his captor through the gallery doorway, down the steps, and out into the enshrouding, moon-checkered jungle.

"Sit down and put on your shoes!"

Landrigan obeyed. But with the return of leather to cover his tender soles, something of self-possession came as well. He began to talk indignantly, though in a low tone. What did Smith think he was doing? Had the man gone mad?

"I ought to kill you," interrupted Smith coldly. "If ever a white man deserved death, you do—yellow dog!" The last two words grated. "I knew that sometime you would come back, so I waited. Now, either get up and go, and keep your mouth shut, or I'll blow your gizzard all over the ferns!"

Landrigan shivered. He knew only too well that Smith had never been a bluffer. So the terrified manager clutched at the one offered straw of hope. Smith hinted that he would not actually kill his quarry. Landrigan, trying his best to regain some semblance of his usual jaunty demeanor, strode ahead through the jungle in the direction of the sinister bamboo forest. With all his heart he damned himself for venturing back into this accursed region. Natheshire had been right in respect to Smith.

Why had not he, Landrigan, discharged Smith long ago instead of letting him keep the Mazaruni River station?

Down in his heart the manager knew the answer to that. He had been afraid at first that, if discharged, Smith might come down and make a horrible scene in the offices at Georgetown. Later there had been the feeling that sooner or later Smith, like all jungle traders soon or late, would fall victim to a poisoned dart, or the cut of a keen machete. But Smith had survived!

On and on. Half an hour more, and they reached the first of the giant bamboos. Here the underbrush was scant. The great stalks, some of them a foot in diameter and more, thin of shell, hard as baked shellac, slanted upward like royal palms on an atoll in the zone of the trade winds.

The spot was eery, hushed like the vault of a cathedral. There was no moonlight at first, only a vague diffusion which let a man pick his way between the stalks.

Once Landrigan started back with a stifled shriek. A dark, low-hung shape had whisked from just in front of his feet. Instantly the muzzle of the automatic jammed into his spine.

"Only a black jaguar," reassured the caustic voice of Smith. "There are worse specters here—in this forest of fleeing souls!"

"What do you mean to do with m-me?" quavered Landrigan. The last vestiges of his nerve were deserting him now.

No answer. The grim, gaunt man be-

hind prodded him onward. Now they reached the first of the awesome bamboo stumps, beside which the trunk lay moldering on the ground. The stump itself was a clean-cut thumb of bamboo, projecting from its roots, just to the height of a man's neck. . . .

A whimper burst from Landrigan. On further now there was a regular clearing, into which the moonlight poured. Here were scores, hundreds of the stumps, it seemed. The sacrificial spot of the Indios —probably of this madman behind him!

"Stop here!" Smith's voice was hoarse.

Landrigan obeyed, his knees shaking.

"Right across this clearing, straight ahead, you can see my home, Landrigan. That was where I brought Dick, my brother, when he was learning to walk again, after infantile paralysis. There was no one else to care for him, and I—I loved him, Landrigan.

"And just as surely as if you had cut his throat, you murdered him!"

"Oh, my God!" broke in the manager, almost hysterically. "You don't believe——"

He got no further. Shifting the automatic to his left hand, clenching his right fist for a necessary part of the procedure, Smith took one step forward and struck Landrigan squarely upon the point of the chin. It was a merciful enough blow. The manager pitched forward, knocked cleanly into unconsciousness.

Not wasting so much as a glance on the fallen man, Smith strode across the moonlit glade to the bungalow. Though he never stopped here a single night any more, he kept certain supplies hidden handy in the little building—machetes, coir rope and the like. . . .

MINUTES later, when Landrigan returned to uneasy knowledge of his surroundings, he felt strangely, terribly restrained. He was held erect, though slumping loosely. Something was pulling painfully at the long, waved chestnut hair on his head—hair which the prideful manager always had combed straight back.

He tried to lift his arms to investigate, and could not wrench them free. His legs too were immovable. He came staring awake then, screaming.

He was bound to a new one of the execution bamboos, his head held back by a loop fastened around a long lock of his hair, so that his throat was arched and tense, the Adam's apple fully exposed. His arms were lashed behind the bole of the bamboo. His legs were bound to the stalk near the ground.

Directly before him, arms folded, gaunt face saturninely grim, stood Smith. In the man's right hand, clutched so that the thirty-inch blade slanted upward, was a silvery-keen Collins machete.

The man from the Mazaruni answered none of Landrigan's frantic questions and pleading, through one long minute. He allowed full and ominous realization of his position to sink into the manager. He did not move even a muscle of his lined countenance, as Landrigan went from yells and frantic pleading, to a half-hysterical shrieking, his nerve completely gone.

"Yell all you want," advised Smith coldly. "All will be over for you, long before Natheshire or anyone else can get here from the *shando*."

"But you—you will *hang* for this!" screamed Landrigan.

"No," said Smith unemotionally. "I won't hang, if that is any consolation to you. And besides"—here his voice took on a sudden hoarseness of undiluted savagery—"do you think, you yellow-bellied, treacherous snake, that I care now what happens to me?"

"But what have I done to you? Wh-what have I——"

"Silence now!" commanded Smith. "I will explain a little more in detail why you are here—though deep in your cowardly heart you know, well enough. You never had the nerve for the jungle. I wanted to help you, naturally, so I took over those dangerous trips which were really your job. My kid brother could not travel with me, of course. I thought—as any white man would naturally think—that the very least you could do in return would be to take extra care that nothing happened to crippled little Dick, while I was chancing my life for you.

"Instead of that you left him here by himself——"

"My Indios were in revolt!" cried Landrigan wildly.

"In revolt—because you were too yellow to refuse them rum," gritted Smith. "Yes, that is the whole truth. All—except that when they ran amok, you fled for the protection of the penal colony, and did not even *try* to protect my brother.

"I only found out these details long afterward. And right then I swore that sometime you would be paid, in a coin you could understand. Now is the time of payment. Prepare yourself, coward!"

Up swung the bright machete in the moonlight. Up—and back. Ready for the swift, powerful beheading stroke!

Inarticulate horror, choked screams burst from the throat of the manager. No use now to scream! . . .

The stroke started. It came, swift as light.

Through the forest sounded the mournful bellow of the slashed bamboo, then the gathering crash as the top of the stalk fell away. Landrigan knew no more.

THREE minutes later he came to limp, sweating consciousness. Bonds severed, he lay at the foot of the bamboo stump. It took him one whole minute of staring, aimless incomprehension, before memory returned and brought him completely from his faint, and to his feet with a raucous shriek of realization.

The stroke had missed his throat!

He was free. He stared, stupid. There was the bamboo stump. He felt his own head, and gaped to know it was still on his shoulders.

Something had happened to his long, chestnut hair. The waved tuft which had been looped to the bamboo seemed to be missing. There was a tender spot of scalp, moist with blood, at the crown of his head. The keen blade had cut that close.

Yes, Smith had swung at him—and *missed!*

But where was Smith?

Flinching at a shadow among the bamboos, staring wildly at a sudden, unreasoning fear that the man might return to finish his job, Landrigan crouched back. Small, choked, animal-like noises of terror came from his throat. His shoulders touched the bamboo stump.

With a shriek he leapt away from the horrid thing. Then he turned and sped as fast as his legs would carry him, in the direction of the *shando*.

He was gibbering, out of his mind with sheer terror, when Natheshire and Bisbee Alden met him. They seized him by the arms, shook him, and made him return with them to the inn. There they poured French brandy down his throat, and tried to bring him to himself.

It was little use. Even with a half-pint of the strong liquor inside him, Landrigan still moaned, and shook from head to foot as though with a seizure of the dengue fever. He had said nothing un-

derstandable as yet. Every time they released hold of his arms he leapt erect, shrinking, starting to run one way or another.

Finally at dawn he started to scream demands that he be allowed to go downriver immediately. The grimly disgusted policeman nodded at this, and went forth to make preparations. The sooner Lake Maza-Cuyuni was rid of this specimen, the better Natheshire would be pleased.

No sooner was he out of sight, however, than Landrigan settled matters for himself. With the sudden strength of a maniac, he broke away from Bisbee Alden, and rushed down to the dock where was moored his power cruiser. After frantic work, and some ineffectual *shuff-shuffing* of the motor, there came a barrage of sudden explosions.

Then, despite Alden's half-hearted attempts to stop him, and Natheshire who came running and yelling angrily, Landrigan shoved off alone, and roared out in a sweep across the lake. He was bound for the Essequibo River, and Demerara far downstream.

"Good land alive!" breathed the half-exhausted Alden. "He didn't even wait for a river pilot or a crew!"

"He may not make it. You have to know your way through those marshes of the lower river," said Natheshire, grimacing. "Well, perhaps it would be just as well. The man is stark, raving crazy.

"Let's you and I, Alden, go back there to the bamboos. I'm a policeman, after all—though maybe I'll refuse to do any guessing in this particular case."

"It shouldn't be hard to imagine," said Alden soberly. "Poor Smith must have exacted revenge—of a sort."

In silence after that, just as a red sun was rising, they walked to the bungalow and the little glade in the bamboos near the mouth of the Mazaruni. There Natheshire, once chuckling grimly to himself, pointed out the new stump and the fallen top of the great bamboo which had bellowed. Then, moving back of the stump a few steps, he bent down.

"Look at this, Alden!" he said.

Bound firmly to the base of the upper portion of the bamboo stalk, just where it had been sliced away from the stump, was a five-inch tuft of waved chestnut hair!

Bisbee Alden shook his head slowly, wordlessly. Then he suddenly tensed, reaching over and gripping Natheshire's wrist. They both turned their heads.

There, motionless behind them, stood a tall, gaunt-featured man. Without being told, Alden realized full well that this must indeed be the mysterious Smith.

"HOWDY, Lieutenant," said the man in a deep, melancholy voice. "I suppose this must be the Mr. Alden I've heard about, the new agent for the Cuyuni?"

He advanced one stride, proffering a handclasp.

"My name is Smith. I have had the Mazaruni station. I—I resigned today."

"Quite!" interjected Natheshire dryly.

After a moment's hesitation, Bisbee Alden accepted the handshake, and liked its firmness.

"I suppose I ought to arrest you, Smith, on suspicion," cogitated Natheshire aloud, scratching his stubbly chin. "But I'm damned if I think I will! Anyway, I'll wait until someone swears out a warrant."

"Thanks," said Smith, with a hint of a grim smile in his mouth corners. "No one will."

"Probably Landrigan even forgot his report," chuckled Alden with relief, sensing an end to the tension.

"This probably doesn't seem like ex-

actly a square deal to hand out to a new man, Alden," continued Smith. "But I'll tell you what. I have locked up the Mazaruni station, and made my Indios understand that there is a deadly taboo upon it. They will leave it alone till someone else comes to take charge.

"But meanwhile, you have the tough job of starting a station which has been closed down for five months—and I understand you are new to the Guiana jungle?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, then. I have all the time there is. If you'd like my help—without pay, of course—and Natheshire says it's all right, I'll go up the Cuyuni with you for a while. I can manage any of those Indios with no trouble at all."

"I should think you might!" said Natheshire, under his breath. But he smiled then, and made no objection.

"Thanks a lot, Smith!" exclaimed Alden in relief. He had wondered what he was going to do; and now he had a feeling of delicious excitement in conquering that chill that skittered across his shoulder-blades.

"I'm damned glad to accept! To clinch it, let's all go back to the *shando* and have a spot. I admit that I—well, I could make mighty good use of one right now!"

Mementos

By MARIE W. LINNÉ

I will not haunt you after I am dead;
  My wistful, sad, unsatiated wraith
Shall not be lingering near these streets we tread,
  These walls that look so much on love and death;
My hungry laughing eyes, the words we said
Shall no way haunt you after I am dead. . . .

Oh, I'll have other things than these to do;
  I'll find a deep depression in a hill,
And to the wind's white songs, the drip of dew,
  Call all lost, joyous hearts to dance their fill,
So passers-by shall wonder, pausing there,
Remembering joy before man knew despair.

And I will keep a tame wind for my own,
  And if I break your musings, now and then,
Riding by, through some lamplit dusk, alone,
  You will remember lightly, once again,
A snatch of song, a vanished jest or two. . . .
No, but for these, I'll not come back to you.

The Tomb-spawn

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A tale of a star-spawned monstrosity, and the eldritch magic of a powerful king and wizard

EVENING had come from the desert into Faraad, bringing the last stragglers of caravans. In a wine-shop near the northern gate, many travelling merchants from outer lands, parched and weary, were refreshing themselves with the famed vintages of Yoros. To divert them from their fatigue, a story-teller spoke amid the clinking of the wine-cups:

"Great was Ossaru, being both king and wizard. He ruled over half the continent of Zothique. His armies were like the rolling sands, blown by the simoom. He commanded the genii of storm and of darkness, he called down the spirits of the sun. Men knew his wizardry as the green cedars know the blasting of levin.

"Half immortal, he lived from age to age, waxing in his wisdom and power till the end. Thasaidon, black god of evil, prospered his every spell and enterprise. And during his latter years he was companioned by the monster Nioth Korghai, who came down to Earth from an alien world, riding a fire-maned comet.

"Ossaru, by his skill in astrology, had foreseen the coming of Nioth Korghai. Alone, he went forth into the desert to await the monster. In many lands people saw the falling of the comet, like a sun that came down by night upon the waste; but only King Ossaru beheld the arrival of Nioth Korghai. He returned in the black, moonless hours before dawn, when all men slept, bringing the strange monster to his palace, and housing him in a vault beneath the throne-room, which he had prepared for Nioth Korghai's abode.

"Dwelling always thereafter in the vault, the monster remained unknown and unbeheld. It was said that he gave advice to Ossaru, and instructed him in the lore of the outer planets. At certain periods of the stars, women and young warriors were sent down as a sacrifice to Nioth Korghai; and these never returned to give account of that which they had seen. None could surmise his aspect; but all who entered the palace heard ever in the vault beneath a muffled noise as of slow-beaten drums, and a regurgitation such as would be made by an underground fountain; and sometimes men heard an evil cackling as of a mad cockatrice.

"For many years King Ossaru was served by Nioth Korghai, and gave service to the monster in return. Then Nioth Korghai sickened with a strange malady, and men heard no more the cackling in the sunken vault; and the noises of drums and fountain-mouths grew fainter, and ceased. The spells of the wizard king were powerless to avert his death; but when the monster had died, Ossaru surrounded his body with a double zone of enchantment, circle by circle, and closed the vault. And later, when Ossaru died, the vault was opened from above, and the king's mummy was lowered therein by his slaves, to repose for ever beside that which remained of Nioth Korghai.

"Cycles have gone by since then; and Ossaru is but a name on the lips of story-tellers. Lost now is the palace wherein he dwelt, and the city thereabout, some say-

ing that it stood in Yoros, and some, in the empire of Cincor, where Yethlyreom was later built by the Nimboth dynasty. And this alone is certain, that somewhere still, in the sealed tomb, the alien monster abides in death, together with King Ossaru. And about them still is the inner circle of Ossaru's enchantment, rendering their bodies incorruptible throughout all the decay of cities and kingdoms; and around this is another circle, guarding against all intrusion: since he who enters there by the tomb's door will die instantly and will putrefy in the moment of death, falling to dusty corruption ere he strike the ground.

"Such is the legend of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai. No man has ever found their tomb; but the wizard Namirrha, prophesying darkly, foretold many ages ago that certain travellers, passing through the desert, would some day come upon it unaware. And he said that these travellers, descending into the tomb by another way than the door, would behold a strange prodigy. And he spoke not concerning the nature of the prodigy, but said only that Nioth Korghai, being a creature from some far world, was obedient to alien laws in death as in life. And of that which Namirrha meant, no man has yet guessed the secret."

The brothers Milab and Marabac, who were jewel-merchants from Ustaim, had listened raptly to the story-teller.

"Now truly this is a strange tale," said Milab. "However, as all men know, there were great wizards in the olden days, workers of deep enchantment and wonder; and also there were true prophets. And the sands of Zothique are full of lost tombs and cities."

"It is a good story," said Marabac, "but it lacks an ending. Prithee, O teller of tales, canst tell us no more than this? Was there no treasure of precious metals and jewels entombed with the monster and the king? I have seen sepulchers where the dead were walled with gold ingots, and sarcophagi that poured forth rubies like the gouted blood of vampires."

"I relate the legend as my fathers told it," affirmed the story-teller. "They who are destined to find the tomb must tell the rest—if haply they return from the finding."

MILAB and Marabac had traded their store of uncut jewels, of carven talismans and small jasper and carnelian idols, making a good profit in Faraad. Now, laden with rosy and purple-black pearls from the southern gulfs, and the black sapphires and winy garnets of Yoros, they were returning northward toward Tasuun with a company of other merchants on the long, circuitous journey to Ustaim by the orient sea.

The way had led through a dying land. Now, as the caravan approached the borders of Yoros, the desert began to assume a profounder desolation. The hills were dark and lean, like recumbent mummies of giants. Dry waterways ran down to lake-bottoms leprous with salt. Billows of gray sand were driven high on the crumbling cliffs, where gentle waters had once rippled. Columns of dust arose and went by like fugitive phantoms. Over all, the sun was a monstrous ember in a charred heaven.

Into this waste, which was seemingly unpeopled and void of life, the caravan went warily. Urging their camels to a swift trot in the narrow, deep-walled ravines, the merchants made ready their spears and claymores and scanned the barren ridges with anxious eyes. For here, in hidden caves, there lurked a wild and half-bestial people, known as the Ghorii. Akin to the ghouls and jackals, they were eaters of carrion; and also they were an-

thropophagi, subsisting by preference on the bodies of travellers, and drinking their blood in lieu of water or wine. They were dreaded by all who had occasion to journey between Yoros and Tasuun.

The sun climbed to its meridian, searching with ruthless beams the nethermost umbrage of the strait, steep defiles. The fine ash-light sand was no longer stirred by any puff of wind.

Now the road ran downward, following the course of some olden stream between acclivitous banks. Here, in lieu of former pools, there were pits of sand dammed up by riffles or boulders, in which the camels floundered knee-deep. And here, without the least warning, in a turn of the sinuous bed, the gully swarmed and seethed with the hideous earth-brown bodies of the Ghorii, who appeared instantaneously on all sides, leaping wolfishly from the rocky slopes or flinging themselves like panthers from the high ledges.

These ghoulish apparitions were unspeakably ferocious and agile. Uttering no sound, other than a sort of hoarse coughing and spitting, and armed only with their double rows of pointed teeth and their sickle-like talons, they poured over the caravan in a climbing wave. It seemed that there were scores of them to each man and camel. Several of the dromedaries were thrown to earth at once, with the Ghorii gnawing their legs and haunches and chines, or hanging dog-wise at their throats. They and their drivers were buried from sight by the ravenous monsters, who began to devour them immediately. Boxes of jewels and bales of rich fabrics were torn open in the mêlée, jasper and onyx idols were strewn ignominiously in the dust, pearls and rubies, unheeded, lay weltering in puddled blood; for these things were of no value to the Ghorii.

Milab and Marabac, as it happened, were riding at the rear. They had lagged behind, somewhat against their will, since the camel ridden by Milab had gone lame from a stone-bruise; and thus, by good fortune, they evaded the ghoulish onset. Pausing aghast, they beheld the fate of their companions, whose resistance was overcome with horrible quickness. The Ghorii, however, did not perceive Milab and Marabac, being wholly intent on devouring the camels and merchants they had dragged down, as well as those members of their own band that were wounded by the swords and lances of the travellers.

The two brothers, levelling their spears, would have ridden forward to perish bravely and uselessly with their fellows. But, terrified by the hideous tumult, by the odor of blood and the hyena-like scent of the Ghorii, their dromedaries balked and bolted, carrying them back along the route into Yoros.

During this unpremeditated flight they soon saw another band of the Ghorii, who had appeared far off on the southern slopes and were running to intercept them. To avoid this new peril Milab and Marabac turned their camels into a side ravine. Travelling slowly because of the lameness of Milab's dromedary, and thinking to find the swift Ghorii on their heels at any moment, they went eastward for many miles with the sun lowering behind them, and came at midafternoon to the low and rainless watershed of that immemorial region.

Here they looked out over a sunken plain, wrinkled and eroded, where the white walls and domes of some innominate city gleamed. It appeared to Milab and Marabac that the city was only a few leagues away. Deeming they had sighted some hidden town of the outer sands, and hopeful now of escaping their pur-

suers, they began the descent of the long slope toward the plain.

FOR two days, on a powdery terrain that was like the bituminous dust of mummies, they travelled toward the ever-receding domes that had seemed so near. Their plight became desperate; for between them they possessed only a handful of dried apricots and a water-bag that was three-fourths empty. Their provisions, together with their stock of jewels and carvings, had been lost with the packdromedaries of the caravan. Apparently there was no pursuit from the Ghorii; but about them there gathered the red demons of thirst, the black demons of hunger. On the second morning Milab's camel refused to rise and would not respond either to the cursing of its master or the prodding of his spear. Thereafter, the two shared the remaining camel, riding together or by turns.

Often they lost sight of the gleaming city, which appeared and disappeared like a mirage. But an hour before sunset, on the second day, they followed the far-thrown shadows of broken obelisks and crumbling watch-towers into the olden streets.

The place had once been a metropolis; but now many of its lordly mansions were scattered shards or heaps of down-fallen blocks. Great dunes of sand had poured in through proud triumphal arches, had filled the pavements and courtyards. Lurching with exhaustion, and sick at heart with the failure of their hope, Milab and Marabac went on, searching everywhere for some well or cistern that the long desert years had haply spared.

In the city's heart, where the walls of temples and lofty buildings of state still served as a barrier to the engulfing sand, they found the ruins of an old aqueduct, leading to cisterns dry as furnaces. There were dust-choked fountains in the market-places but nowhere was there anything to betoken the presence of water.

Wandering hopelessly on, they came to the ruins of a huge edifice which, it appeared, had been the palace of some forgotten monarch. The mighty walls, defying the erosion of ages, were still extant. The portals, guarded on either hand by green brazen images of mythic heroes, still frowned with unbroken arches. Mounting the marble steps, the jewelers entered a vast, roofless hall where cyclopean columns towered as if to bear up the desert sky.

The broad pavement flags were mounded with debris of arches and architraves and pilasters. At the hall's far extreme there was a dais of black-veined marble on which, presumably, a royal throne had once reared. Nearing the dais, Milab and Marabac both heard a low and indistinct gurgling as of some hidden stream or fountain, that appeared to rise from underground depths below the palace pavement.

Eagerly trying to locate the source of the sound, they climbed the dais. Here a huge block had fallen from the wall above, perhaps recently, and the marble had cracked beneath its weight, and a portion of the dais had broken through into some underlying vault, leaving a dark and jagged aperture. It was from this opening that the water-like regurgitation rose, incessant and regular as the beating of a pulse.

The jewelers leaned above the pit, and peered down into webby darkness shot with a doubtful glimmering that came from an indiscernible source. They could see nothing. A dank and musty odor touched their nostrils, like the breath of some long-sealed reservoir. It seemed to them that the steady fountain-like noise

was only a few feet below in the shadows, a little to one side of the opening.

Neither of them could determine the depth of the vault. After a brief consultation they returned to their camel, which was waiting stolidly at the palace entrance; and removing the camel's harness they knotted the long reins and leather body-bands into a single thong that would serve them in lieu of rope. Going back to the dais, they secured one end of this thong to the fallen block, and lowered the other into the dark pit.

Milab descended hand over hand into the depths for ten or twelve feet before his toes encountered a solid surface. Still gripping the thong cautiously, he found himself on a level floor of stone. The day was fast waning beyond the palace walls; but a wan glimmer was afforded by the hole in the pavement above; and the outlines of a half-open door, sagging at a ruinous angle, were revealed at one side by the feeble twilight that entered the vault from unknown crypts or stairs beyond.

While Marabac came nimbly down to join him, Milab peered about for the source of the water-like noise. Before him in the undetermined shadows he discerned the dim and puzzling contours of an object that he could liken only to some enormous clepsydra or fountain surrounded with grotesque carvings.

The light seemed to fail momently. Unable to decide the nature of the object, and having neither torch nor candle, he tore a strip from the hem of his hempen burnoose, and lit the slow-burning cloth and held it aloft at arm's length before him. By the dull, smoldering luminance thus obtained, the jewelers beheld more clearly the thing that bulked prodigious and monstrous, rearing above them from the fragment-littered floor to the shadowy roof.

THE thing was like some blasphemous dream of a mad devil. Its main portion or body was urn-like in form and was pedestalled on a queerly tilted block of stone at the vault's center. It was palish and pitted with innumerable small apertures. From its bosom and flattened base many arm-like and leg-like projections trailed in swollen nightmare segments to the ground; and two other members, sloping tautly, reached down like roots into an open and seemingly empty sarcophagus of gilded metal, graven with weird archaic ciphers, that stood beside the block.

The urn-shaped torso was endowed with two heads. One of these heads was beaked like a cuttle-fish and was lined with long oblique slits where the eyes should have been. The other head, in close juxtaposition on the narrow shoulders, was that of an aged man, dark and regal and terrible, whose burning eyes were like balas-rubies and whose grizzled beard had grown to the length of jungle moss on the loathsomely porous trunk. This trunk, on the side below the human head, displayed a faint outline as of ribs; and some of the members ended in human hands and feet, or possessed anthropomorphic jointings.

Through heads, limbs and body there ran recurrently the mysterious noise of regurgitation that had drawn Milab and Marabac to enter the vault. At each repetition of the sound a slimy dew exuded from the monstrous pores and rilled sluggishly down in endless drops.

The jewelers were held speechless and immobile by a clammy terror. Unable to avert their gaze, they met the baleful eyes of the human head, glaring upon them from its unearthly eminence. Then, as the hempen strip in Milab's fingers burned slowly away and failed to a red smolder, and darkness gathered again in the vault,

they saw the blind slits in the other head open gradually, pouring forth a hot, yellow, intolerably flaming light as they expanded to immense round orbits. At the same time they heard a singular drum-like throbbing, as if the heart of the huge monster had become audible.

They knew only that a strange horror not of earth, or but partially of earth, was before them. The sight deprived them of thought and memory. Least of all did they remember the story-teller in Faraad, and the tale he had told concerning the hidden tomb of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai, and the prophecy of the tomb's finding by those who should come to it unaware.

Swiftly, with a dreadful stretching and straightening, the monster lifted its foremost members, ending in the brown, shrivelled hands of an old man, and reached out toward the jewelers. From the cuttle-fish beak there issued a shrill demonian cackling; from the mouth of the kingly graybeard head a sonorous voice began to utter words of solemn cadence, like some enchanter's rune, in a tongue unknown to Milab and Marabac.

They recoiled before the abhorrently groping hands. In a frenzy of fear and panic, by the streaming light of its incandescent orbs, they saw the anomaly rise and lumber forward from its stone seat, walking clumsily and uncertainly on its ill-assorted members. There was a trampling of elephantine pads—and a stumbling of human feet inadequate to bear up their share of the blasphemous hulk. The two stiffly sloping tentacles were withdrawn from the gold sarcophagus, their ends muffled by empty, jewel-sown cloths of a precious purple, such as would be used for the winding of some royal mummy. With a ceaseless and insane cackling, a malign thundering as of curses that broke to senile quavers, the double-deaded horror leaned toward Milab and Marabac.

Turning, they ran wildly across the roomy vault. Before them, illumined now by the pouring rays from the monster's orbits, they saw the half-open door of somber metal whose bolts and hinges had rusted away, permitting it to sag inward. The door was of cyclopean height and breadth, as if designed for beings huger than man. Beyond it were the dim reaches of a twilight corridor.

Five paces from the doorway there was a faint red line that followed the chamber's conformation on the dusty floor. Marabac, a little ahead of his brother, crossed the line. As if checked in midair by some invisible wall, he faltered and stopped. His limbs and body seemed to melt away beneath the burnoose—the burnoose itself became tattered as with incalculable age. Dust floated on the air in a tenuous cloud, and there was a momentary gleaming of white bones where his outflung hands had been. Then the bones too were gone—and an empty heap of rags lay rotting on the floor.

A faint odor as of corruption rose to the nostrils of Milab. Uncomprehending, he had checked his own flight for an instant. Then, on his shoulders, he felt the grasp of slimy, withered hands. The cackling and muttering of the heads was like a demon chorus behind him. The drum-like beating, the noise of rising fountains, were loud in his ears. With one swiftly dying scream he followed Marabac over the red line.

The enormity that was both man and star-born monster, the nameless amalgam of an unearthly resurrection, still lumbered on and did not pause. With the hands of that Ossaru who had forgotten his own enchantment, it reached for the two piles of empty rags. Reaching, it entered the zone of death and dissolution

which Ossaru himself had established to guard the vault for ever. For an instant, on the air, there was a melting as of misshapen cloud, a falling as of light ashes. After that the darkness returned, and with the darkness, silence.

NIGHT settled above that nameless land, that forgotten city; and with its coming the Ghorii, who had followed Milab and Marabac over the desert plain. Swiftly they slew and ate the camel that waited patiently at the palace entrance. Later, in the old hall of columns, they found that opening in the dais through which the jewelers had descended. Hungrily they gathered about the hole, sniffing at the tomb beneath. Then, baffled, they went away, their keen nostrils telling them that the scent was lost, that the tomb was empy either of life or death.

The Gray Death*

By LOUAL B. SUGARMAN

UNWAVERINGLY, my guest sustained my perplexed and angry stare. Silently he withstood the battering words I launched at him. He appeared quite unmoved by my reproaches, save for a dull red flush that crept up and flooded his face, as now and then I grew particularly bitter in my tirade.

At length I ceased. It was like hitting into a mass of feathers: there was no resistance to my blows. He had made no attempt to justify himself. After a moment of silence, he spoke his first word since he had entered the room.

"I'm sorry, my friend, sorrier than you can imagine, but—I couldn't help it. I simply could not touch her hand. The shock—so suddenly to come upon her—to see her as she was—I tell you, I forgot myself. Please convey to your wife my most abject apologies, will you? I am sorry, for I know I should have liked her very much. But—now I must go."

"You can't go out in this storm," I answered. "It's out of the question. I'm sorry, too, sorry that you acted as you did—and more than sorry that I spoke to you as I did, just now. But I was angry. Can you blame me? I'd been waiting for

* From WEIRD TALES for June, 1923.

this moment ever since I heard from you that you had come back from the Amazon —the moment when you, my best friend, and my wife were to meet. And then—why, damn it, man, I can't understand it! To pull back, to shrink away as you did; even to refuse to take her hand or acknowledge the introduction! It was unbelievably rude. It hurt her, and it hurt me."

"I know it, and that is why I am so very sorry about it all. I can't excuse myself, but I can tell you a story that may explain."

I saw, however, that for some reason he was reluctant to talk.

"You need not," I said. "Let's drop the whole matter, and in the morning you can make your amends to Laura."

Anthony shook his head.

"It's not pleasant to talk about, but that was not my reason for hesitating. I was afraid you would not believe me if I did tell you. Sometimes the truth strains one's credulity too much. But I will tell you. It may do me good to talk about it, and, anyhow, it will explain why I acted as I did.

"Your wife came in just after we entered. She had not yet removed her veil or gloves. They were gray. So was her dress. Her shoes—everything was gray. And she stood there, her hand outstretched — all in that color — a body covered with gray. I can't help shuddering. *I can't stand gray!* It's the color of death. . . . Can your nerves stand the dark?"

I rose and switched off the lights. The room was plunged into darkness, save for the flicker of the flames in the fireplace and the intermittent flashes of lightning. The rain beat through the leafless branches outside with a monotonous, slithering *swish* and rattled like ghostly fingers against the windows.

"The light makes it hard to talk—of unbelievable things. One needs the darkness to hear of hell."

He paused. The *swir-r-r* of the rain crept into the stillness of the room. My companion sighed. The firelight shone on his face, which floated in the darkness—a disembodied face, grown suddenly haggard.

"A good night for this story, with the wind crying like a lost soul in the night. How I hate that sound! Ah, well!"

There was a moment of silence.

"It was not like this, though, that night when we started up the Amazon. No. Then it was warm and soft, and the stars seemed so near. The air was filled with the scent of a thousand tropical blossoms. They grew rank on the shore.

"There were four of us; two natives, myself and Von Housmann. It is of him I am going to tell you. He was a German—and a good man. A great naturalist, and a true friend. He sucked the poison from my leg once, when a snake had bitten me. I thanked him and said I'd repay him some day. I did—sooner than I had thought—with a bullet! I could not bear to see him suffer."

The man sat gazing into the flames, and I listened to the dripping rain fingering the bare boughs and *tap-tap-tapping* on the roof above.

My friend looked up.

"I was seeing his face in the flames," he said. "God help him! . . .

"We had traveled for days—weeks—how long does not matter. We had camped and moved on; we had stopped to gather specimens—always deeper into that evil undergrowth. And as we moved on, Von Housmann and I grew closer; one either grows to love or hate in such circumstances, and Sigmund was not the sort of man one would hate. I tell you, I loved that man!

"One day we struck into a new place. We had left the tracks of other expeditions long before. We trekked along, unmindful of the exotic beauty of our surroundings, when I saw our native, who was up ahead, stop short and sniff the air.

"We stopped, too, and then I noticed what the keener, more primitive sense of our guide had detected first.

"IT WAS an odor. A strange odor, indefinable and sickening. It was filled with foreboding—evil. It smelt—*gray!* I can not describe it any other way. It smelt dead. It made me think of decay—decay, and mold, and—ugly things.

"I shuddered. I looked at Von Housmann, and I saw that he, too, had noticed it.

" 'What is that smell?' I asked.

"He shook his head.

" '*Ach,* dot is new. I haf not smelled it before. But—I do not lige it. It iss not goot. Smells is goot or bat—und dot is not goot. I say, I do not lige dot smell.'

"Neither did I. We went ahead, cautiously now. A curious scent pervaded the air. It puzzled me. Then it struck me: *silence.* Silence, as though the music of the spheres had suddenly been snuffed out. It was the utter cessation of the interminable chirping and chattering of the birds and monkeys and other small animals.

"We had become so accustomed to that multitudinous babel that its absence was disturbing. It was—eery. Yes, that's the word. It made that first impression of lifelessness more intense. Not death, you understand. Even death has in it a thought of life, an element of being. But this was just—lifelessness.

"The gray odor had become so strong that it was well-nigh unbearable. Then we saw our guides running back to us. They rebelled. They refused to go beyond the line of trees ahead. They said it was *taboo.*

"That ended it. No promise, no threat, nothing would move them. Do you know what a savage's *taboo* is? It is stronger than death. And this place was *taboo.* So we left them there with our stuff, and Sigmund and I went on alone. We reached the farthest line of trees and stopped on the edge of a clearing.

"I can't describe that sight to you. But I can see it—good God, how I can still see it! Sometimes I wake up in the night with that nightmarish picture in my eyes, and my nostrils filled with that ghoulish stench.

"It was a field of gray; almost, I might have said, a field of *living* gray. And yet it did not give the impression of life. It moved, although there was not a breath of wind; not a leaf on the trees quivered, but that mass of gray wriggled and crawled and undulated as though it were a huge gray shroud thrown over some monstrous jelly-like Thing. And that Thing was writhing and twisting.

"The gray mass extended as far as I could see ahead. To the right the sandy shore of the river stopped it, and to the left and in front of us it terminated at a distance of a few yards away from the trees where a belt of sand intervened.

"I don't know how long we stood there, my friend Von Housmann and I. It fascinated us. At last he spoke.

" '*Heilige Mutter. Was kommt da?* Vot in der name off all dot iss holy do you call dot? Nefer haf I seen such before. Eferyvere I haf traffeled, but nefer haf I seen a sight lige dot. I tell you, it makes my flesh crawl!'

" 'It makes me sick to look at it,' I answered. 'It looks like—like living corruption.'

"The old German shook his head. He was baffled. We knew we were looking

upon something that no living mortal had ever gazed upon before. And our flesh crawled, as we watched that Thing writhing beneath its blanket of gray.

"We walked slowly and cautiously across the strip of sand to the edge of the gray patch. As I bent over, the pungency of the odor bit into the membrane of my nostrils like an acid, and my eyes smarted.

"And then I saw something that drove all other thoughts from my mind. The mass was a moss-like growth of tiny gray fungi. They were shaped like miniature mushrooms, but out of the top of each grew a countless number of antennæ that ceaselessly twisted and writhed in the air. They seemed to be feeling and groping around for something, and it was this incessant movement that gave to the patch that quivering undulation which I had noticed before.

"I stared until my eyes ached. 'What do you make of it?' I ask my friend.

"'*Ach,* I do not know. It iss incomprehensible. I haf nefer seen such a—a t'ing in my whole, long life. It iss, I should say, some sort off a fungoid growt'. *Ya,* it iss clearly dot. But der species—um, dot iss *not* so clear. Und dose liddle feelers; on a fungus dot iss new—it iss unheard off. See, *die verdammte* t'ings iss lige lifting fingers; dey svay und tvist lige dey vas feeling for somet'ings, not? I am egseedingly curious. Und I am baffled—und, my friendt, I do not lige dot.'

"Impatiently, he reached out a stick he was carrying, a newly cut, stout cudgel of dried wood. He stirred around with it in the growth at his feet. And then a cry broke from his lips.

"'*Ach, du lieber Gott—gnädiger Gott im Himmel! Sieh' da!*'

"I looked where he was pointing. His hand trembled violently—and little wonder! The stick, for about twelve inches up, was a mass of gray!

"And as I watched, I saw, steadily growing before my eyes, that awful gray creep up and surround the wood. I'm not exaggerating; in less time than it takes to tell, it had almost reached Von Housmann's hand. He threw it from him with an exclamation of horror.

"It fell into the gray growth and instantly vanished. It seemed to melt away.

"Sigmund looked at me. He was pale. At last he sighed.

"'So-o-o! Ve learn. On vood it grows. I might haf guessed. Dot iss der reason dot no trees are here. It destroys dem. But so *schnell; ach,* lige fire it growed. My friendt, I lige dot stuff lesser *als* before. It is not healt'y. But vot vill it not eat?'

"I HANDED him my rifle. He took it, and poked the growth with the muzzle. Man, my hair fairly stood on end! Do you know anything about fungi? No? Well, I have never known or heard of any vegetable growth that would attack blue steel. But that stuff—I tell you, that rifle barrel sprouted a crop of that gray mass as quickly as had the wood!

"I grabbed the gun and lifted it out of the patch. Already several inches of steel had been eaten—literally *eaten*—off. I held it up and watched that damnable gray crawl along the barrel. It just seemed to melt the metal. It melted like sealing-wax, and great gray flakes dropped off to the ground.

"Nearer and nearer it came—to the rear sight, the trigger-guard, the hammer. It was uncanny—like a dream. I stood there, paralyzed. I could not believe what my eyes told me was true. I looked at Sigmund. His mouth was open and his face was white as death. I laughed at

his face. That seemed to tear away the mist. He yelled and pointed, and I looked down.

"Not two inches from my hand was that mass. I could see those feelers reaching out toward my hand, and I was sick. Instinctively, I threw the gun from me, aimlessly, blindly. It fell on the sand belt outside the gray mass.

"Hardly had it struck the sand before the growth had reached the butt, and then there was nothing to be seen but a tiny patch of that gray, poisonous Thing. And as we looked, it began to melt. Gradually, steadily, it was disappearing.

" 'Quick, quick,' shouted Von Housmann, and we ran over to the spot. By bending over, we could see what was happening.

"The feelers, or antennæ, which we had noticed before, had vanished, but instead, at the base of each individual plant, there were similar tendrils, but more of them—thousands and thousands of them all feeling and groping frantically about. And as they swayed and twisted and brushed the sand, one by one they shriveled up and seemed to withdraw into the parent body.

"Gradually this nucleus itself shrank and withered, until it was no more than a tiny gray speck on the sand. Soon that was all that was left: a lot of tiny whitish particles, much lighter in color than the original plant, scattered around on the sand.

"I looked at Von Housmann, and he looked at me. After a long interval, he spoke, slowly, almost as though it were a painful effort.

" 'Ant'ony, ve haf seen a—miracle. From vot, or how, or ven, dot hell-growt' sprang, I do not know. I do not know how many, many years it has stood here; maybe it has been here for centuries. But I do know dis: if dot sand was not here—vell, I shudder to t'ink off vot vould be today.'

"I stared.

" 'You do not understand? *Ach, so!* You haf seen vot happened to dot stick? Und to dot gun of steel? So! Look, now.'

"He took off his hat and went over to the border of the patch. He touched—just barely touched the brim of the hat to the gray matter and held it up. Already a growth was moving up the linen. He nodded, then threw it away, onto the sand. Speechless, we watched it fade away under the merciless attack of that horrible stuff, and then, in turn, the gray fungoid growth wither and disappear.

" 'Now do you understand? Do you see vot I meant? Vood, steel, linen—eferyt'ing vot it touches it *eats*. It grows fast—like flame in dry sticks—all-consuming. *Aber—siehst du?*—dot sand, ven it touched dot, it died. It starved. Und see! Look close—more closer still—at dot sand. Do you see anyt'ing odd about it?'

"I shook my head. It looked very fine and light, but I could not see anything unusual.

" 'No? Iss it not glass, dot sand? Look at it und at der sand vere dot T'ing has not been, and see if it is not so different.'

"I picked up some sand from under my foot. And then I saw what he had seen at once. The sand in my hand was coarser, dirtier—in short, like any fine-grained sand you may have seen. But the sand where the gray stuff had fallen was clear, glass-like. It was almost transparent, and I saw that what was there was a mass of silica particles. I nodded.

" 'Yes,' I said. 'I see now. That stuff has eaten out every particle of mineral, of dirt and dust, but not the silica!'

' 'Egsactly! Und dot iss vot has safed us from—Gott only knows vot! I do not know vot dot stuff vill eat, but I *do* know

it vill not eat silica. Vy? I do not know. Dot is yet a mystery. So, it starts; *ach,* dot too, I do not know—but it starts somewhere. Und it eats und grows, and grows und eats, und eferyt'ing vot it touches it consumes—egsept sand. Sand stops it.

" 'It eats out der stuff in der sand, but not der silica, und starves und dies. It is a miracle. If der sand vas not here—*ach, Gott!*—it vould keep on going until—vell, I do not know! I haf nefer seen dot before. I am intrigued, und I am going to take dot stuff—oh, only a liddle bit!—und I shall not rest until I haf learned somet'ing about it. Und because I haf seen it does not lige sand, I vill make for it a cage—a liddle box of glass, und study it lige it vas a bug. Not?'

"WE RETURNED to where our natives still stood with our packs. We quickly fitted together some microscopic slides into a rough box and bound it about with string. With it, we returned to the edge of the gray patch. Von Housmann knelt down and carefully scooped up a bit of the fungus with a glass spatula. He dumped this into his box and waited. In five minutes it had disappeared. He looked up blankly.

" 'You forgot, Sigmund,' I said, smiling at his woful expression. "It starves on silica. It won't live in glass.'

" '*Ach. Dummkopf!* Of course! I haf forgot dot. But ve vill fool dot heli-plant. He goes yet on hunger-strike—no? Ve try now dot forcible feeding.'

"He took out his knife and cut several small splinters from a near-by tree.

" 'Ve vill feed him, so. Dot vood, it vill be for him a great feast, und he shall eat and eat, und ve vill study him und see vot ve vill see.'

"Laughing, he bent over and shook out the tiny gray residue which was in the box. He dropped in a sliver of wood and was bending over to refill his box when I felt a sting on my foot. I looked down, and my heart stood still.

"On my shoe, just in between the laces, was a spot of gray. I could not move. I was cold. I can not describe how I felt, but I seemed turned to stone. My flesh quivered and shrank and I was sick—very sick. Sigmund looked up, startled, and then he looked at my feet.

"The next thing I knew I was on my back, my foot in his hand. One slash of his knife across the thongs which laced my boot, and he jerked it off.

"The biting grew worse. I heard him gasp, and then I felt a sharp pain. My head swam and I must have fainted. I regained consciousness—I don't know how soon after—and I found myself back under the trees. I looked at my foot, which was throbbing and burning like fire. It was swathed in a bandage that Von Housmann had taken from his emergency kit and was wrapping around the instep. It was deeply stained with blood.

"I moved, and he looked up. He smiled when he saw I was conscious.

" 'Dot vas a close shave—*yes?* It had just eaten into der shoe as I pulled it off, und one spot—lige a bencil-dot—on your skin vas gray. So I cut it out and all around it, und so you haf a hole in your foot, but—you haf your foot. Now so! You lie here, und I get der niggers and ve take you to bed.'

"A tent was soon erected and I was carried into it. For two days I lay there, delirious much of the time. Sigmund never left my side. He even slept there. He was insistent that it was his fault. He said one of the apparently dead fungi had dropped on my shoe and had revived there. That is, the plant, instead of dying, had shriveled up, but the life-nucleus was

still strong. I shudder even now when I think of what might have been.

"At the end of the third day I was able to hobble about a little with the aid of a cane. That afternoon Sigmund came to me and asked if I would care to go with him to fill his little glass box. I refused, and he laughed. It was the last time I ever heard him laugh. I begged him to leave that stuff alone.

"Still laughing, he made some light reply and left me. I lay in my cot. I was filled with forebodings. The heat was intense, and I must have dropped off to sleep. I dreamed horrible, troublesome, weird dreams. I awoke, bathed in a cold sweat. I felt sure that something was wrong, that someone was calling for me. I got to my feet and left my tent. No one was in sight. I tried to laugh at my premonition. I bitterly regretted that I had allowed my friend to override my persuasions.

"Hurrying as much as was possible, I started toward the clearing. My wound throbbed and ached. Once I stumbled in my eagerness. It was horrible—like a nightmare.

"I must have covered half the distance when I heard a scream. What a shriek it was! I wake up nights even now hearing it. It was unrecognizable—like some unearthly animal. Just that one scream. My stick hindered me. I threw it away and ran.

"My blood was cold in my veins, but I felt not one twinge of pain in my foot. At last I came to the edge of the clearing. And there—God, it makes me sick even now to think of it."

THE speaker paused. His face was chalky, and he shuddered and buried his face in his hands. I think he was crying.

Outside, the wind still howled, dully, monotonously, eerily. Sometimes it would shriek and scream. Then my friend's voice again—level, dead, cold.

"I looked out, I saw Sigmund standing on the sand. I can see him as plainly as though he were here now. His face was ashen. He was looking down. At his feet were the fragments of the glass box he had made.

"He was holding out his hands, looking at them. They were gray. And they writhed and twisted, but his arms were still. He was not even trembling. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and my throat was dry—but at last I called to him.

" 'Sigmund! Sigmund!' I cried. 'For God's sake——'

"He looked up, and, I tell you, I never want to see such a face again! I can never forget it. It was the face of a soul in torture. He looked at me and held out his arms. His hands were gone—flaked off in large gray, writhing drops to the sand at his feet!

"He tried to smile, but couldn't.

"Another gray blob dropped off. I was dizzy with sickness. It was unbelievable. And then he spoke. His voice was well-nigh unrecognizable. It croaked and broke:

" 'Done for, my friendt. I feel it eating to my heart. Be merciful and help me. *Shoot*—quick, through der foreheadt!'

"His words beat through the stupor clouding my brain, I started toward him, my hands outstretched. I could not speak.

" *'Um Gottes Willen, bleibt da!* Stop! Stop!'

"His words halted me.

" 'Sigmund! My friend! What——'

" 'Do not come near me! Vould you also be so tormented? Vot dot Gray

touches it consumes. Do not argue, I say, but shoot! *Heilige Mutter!* Vy do you not shoot?'

"His voice rose into a shriek of agony. What was left of one arm had sloughed off, and the other was almost gone. A little mound of gray grew larger at his feet. His flesh was consumed, skin, blood and bone absorbed by that vile gray Thing, and he shrieked in agony and prayer. Both arms were gone, and the stuff at his feet had already begun to eat through his boots.

"I shot him, between his eyes. I saw him fall, and I fainted. When I came to, there was only a mound of tiny gray fungi, greedily reaching their hellish tentacles for sustenance and slowly shriveling into tiny light gray specks of dust on a glossy patch of sand."

Atavism

By A. LESLIE

Your eyes are wide, and darkly green,
Liquidly lustrous like the sheen
Of star-glint on a tree-fringed pool,
Cool, as fire in ice is cool!

But in their depths a *something* crouches,
As a paw-fast panther couches;
A prisoned thing that strains and strains,
But never an inch of freedom gains.

And sometimes when the lights are low,
And stealthy shadows come and go,
I gaze between the prisoning lashes:
The *thing* leaps up, and a vision flashes—

Cliffs of red and a forest dank;
A trail that crawls up the river bank;
On the trail a twisted thing lies stark
And cringes in the gathering dark,

While at its throat a lithe shape crouches,
As a paw-fast panther couches!
Eyes green as the sea of a sun-drenched day—
"Stop, woman! *Take your lips away!*"

THE EYRIE

A PARAGRAPH by Julius Schwartz in *The Fantasy Fan* (a peppy little magazine in which lovers of fantastic fiction in books and magazines exchange opinions) reads: "Without a shadow of a doubt the foremost magazine that specializes in fantastic fiction is WEIRD TALES. Its editor . . . insists that the stories appearing there be of high literary quality, and thus we find that many stories have copped honorable mention in O'Brien's list of the best stories of the year and in the O. Henry Memorial Prize list. The range of WEIRD TALES comprises every type of fantastic fiction: from the occult to science-fiction, from ghost stories to the supernatural, from voodoo thrillers to vampire tales, from werewolf yarns to reincarnation, and from the mystic to the psychic." [We blushingly accept the accolade. We do not claim that all our stories have high literary quality—blood-and-thunder tales are not unknown to the pages of WEIRD TALES—but it is gratifying to see our own belief in the literary excellence of the magazine confirmed by one whose reading of this type of fiction is large and varied. We could cite instances and arguments in proof of our contention that many of the stories published in this magazine deserve rank as real literature; but, after all, the Eyrie belongs to you, the readers, and we will let you do the proving.—THE EDITOR.]

He Likes Cave's Stories

Frederick John Walsen, of Denver, writes to the Eyrie: "The March issue of WEIRD TALES is simply splendid. I don't see how you accomplish the feat, but the issues grow steadily better. . . . *The Black Gargoyle* by Hugh B. Cave took first place for its evil setting and excellent narration. Mr. Cave's stories are always to be admired. *The Charnel God* by Clark Ashton Smith claimed second place for sheer horror and blood-curdling description. Mr. Smith has always written very fine tales. *The Solitary Hunters* by Doctor David H. Keller in all of its thrilling finish took third honors. I believe that the tales of Doctor Keller are unexcelled in their type. He is certainly a fine author, and I hope to read many more just such tales. . . . I suppose that you know it, but in a Paramount picture, *No More Women*, there is a scene showing a fearful sailor reading the December 1933 issue of WEIRD TALES with much awe. And a few more feet of the film shows him shudder and put it down. I thought you should know about this, if you didn't, but I suppose you do."

Jack Reads WT at Night

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes: "I read the March WEIRD TALES at the time I like best to read weird fiction—at night and alone. *Thundering Worlds*, by Edmond Hamilton, I enjoyed most of all. It reminds me of earlier stories of his. *The Solitary Hunters* is the best piece of work that Doctor Keller has turned out for our magazine. Let's hope he doesn't stop with it. Hugh B. Cave is one of my favorite weird story authors. I thought *The Black Gargoyle* a fine tale indeed. Please give us more and longer stories by Mr. Cave."

About an Author's Page

Earl Perry, of Rockdale, Texas, writes: "The March issue is wholly dominated by those two classics of fantastic literature—*The Charnel God* and *Thundering Worlds*. Smith is on a par with Lovecraft in the former, while Hamilton has reached his peak in the latter. Keller closed his novel with a

(Please turn to page 650)

Coming Next Month

ALL that night, and throughout the day that followed, Gaspard du Nord, with the dried slime of the oubliette on his briar-shredded raiment, plunged like a madman through the towering woods that were haunted by robbers and werewolves. The westward-falling moon flickered in his eyes betwixt the gnarled, somber boles as he ran; and the dawn overtook him with the pale shafts of its searching arrows. The noon poured over him its white sultriness, like furnace-heated metal sublimed into light; and the clotted filth that clung to his tatters was again turned into slime by his own sweat. But still he pursued his nightmare-harried way, while a vague, seemingly hopeless plan took form in his mind.

In the interim, several monks watching the gray walls of Ylourgne at early dawn were the first, after Gaspard, to behold the monstrous horror. They swore that the giant rose abruptly, standing waist-high above the ruins of the barbican, amid a sudden leaping of long-tongued fires and a swirling of pitchy fumes. The giant's head was level with the high top of the donjon; and his right arm, outthrust, lay like a bar of stormy cloud athwart the new-risen sun.

The monks fell grovelling to their knees. Then, across the mile-wide valley, they heard a thunderous peal of demoniac laughter; and the giant, climbing over the barbican at a single step, began to descend the hill.

When he drew nearer, bounding from slope to slope, his features were manifestly those of some great devil animated with ire and malice toward the sons of Adam. His hair, in matted locks, streamed behind him like a mass of black pythons; his naked skin was pale and cadaverous, like the skin of the dead; but beneath it, the stupendous thews of a titan swelled and rippled.

The rumor of his coming passed like a gale of terror through the monastery. Many of the Brothers hid themselves in the stone-hewn cellars and vaults. Others crouched in their cells, mumbling and shrieking incoherent pleas to all the Saints. Still others, the most courageous, repaired in a body to the chapel and knelt in solemn prayer before the wooden Christ on the great crucifix. . . .

This shuddery novelette of animated corpses and a gigantic, homicidal robot, that roared in wrath as it bore down upon the cathedral city of Vyones, will be printed complete in the June WEIRD TALES:

THE COLOSSUS OF YLOURGNE

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

—ALSO—

WIZARD'S ISLE

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A swift-moving, vivid tale of a dreadful menace to the world—a weird-scientific story of an uncanny Oriental genius who sought to chain the world to his power.

COLONEL MARKESAN

By AUGUST W. DERLETH *and* MARK SCHORER

A blood-curdling story of a man who was dead and yet lived—a grim tale of corpses that walked and talked.

THEY CALLED HIM GHOST

By LAURENCE J. CAHILL

An utterly different story—the tale of the most amazing scientific discovery ever made, and the strange being—or beings—that stormed into Goeste Hall every thirty years.

THE HAUNTER OF THE RING

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A strange story of dark powers and occult evil, by the author of "Black Colossus" and "The Slithering Shadow."

June WEIRD TALES Out June 1

(Continued from page 648)

bang in that inimitable Kelleristic manner. But *The Late Mourner* by Julius Long had a plot that's so time-worn it's ceased to be even half interesting. The reprint editorial, *Why Weird Tales?* was very, very instructive, as well as entertaining. . . . I see that some of your readers want a page about one of your authors each month. It's a good idea. Let's have something on that order." [In face of the readers' demand for an author's page each month we have heretofore kept silent, because we are loth to run such a department. Many authors—and ours are not different from the authors who write for other magazines — lead rather humdrum lives, and live in a dream world of their own creation. Not all our authors have led such adventurous and varied lives as E. Hoffmann Price and the late S. B. H. Hurst, for instances. And some of our authors write under pen names—G. G. Pendarves, Murray Leinster and Hugh Davidson are pseudonyms—and how can one write the biography of a pen name? But it rests with you, the readers, whether we will run an author's page or not: if enough of you ask for such a page, we will include it as a feature of WEIRD TALES; though we do not want to do so.—THE EDITOR.]

Praise from a Canadian Reader

C. H. Cameron writes from Toronto: "I've just completed the March issue. It's fine, from its startling cover to the editorial reprint. I liked Hazel Heald's story, *Winged Death*. It had a certain matter-of-factness about it that made it convincing. I vote her first place. Doctor Keller's serial, *The Solitary Hunters*, concluded satisfactorily. It is the best of the recent serials. Stuart Strauss is to be commended for his craftsmanship in *The Clenched Hand*. Although the plot is stale, his treatment of it was excellent. . . . I read your editorial reprint with interest. Having never missed a number of WT since almost its first issue, I can say that you have lived up to your promise. I notice that today many magazines print stories that never would have seen print a decade ago. Somehow literature is changing toward the mystic and weird. . . . However, modern literature offers us nothing like what we get in our WT. Owen, Merritt, Lovecraft, the late Doctor Whitehead, and the newer ones: Moore, Cave, and Howard, all contribute their best for our diversion. I missed Seabury Quinn and the Frenchman in this issue. The coming April issue looks exceptionally promising. I hope Moore repeats himself. As I've said before, his story entitled *Shambleau* was excellent."

Orchids for Doctor Keller

C. L. Leighton, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "*The Solitary Hunters* by Keller is the best I've read in six years' reading of WEIRD TALES. Let's have more of Doctor Keller—the first to forge ahead of Lovecraft and Quinn."

About Jules de Grandin

Writes Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California: "Let me express my congratulations for the March issue. It was the best number this year. *The Black Gargoyle* by Hugh B. Cave was a perfect story; Mr. Cave can't write enough to suit me. The cover was a masterpiece; it beat the February cover all hollow. How about another Jules de Grandin story real soon? In my opinion Seabury Quinn is your best author. Try and get a de Grandin story in every issue, as the little Frenchman's adventures are never tiresome. Keep up the good work and be sure to keep the magazine weird." [We expect to print many, many more stories by Seabury Quinn, featuring Jules de Grandin.—THE EDITOR.]

From New Zealand

G. W. Hockley writes from New Brighton, in New Zealand: "I have just received the December issue of WEIRD TALES, and would like to congratulate you again on the continued high quality of the magazine. I can not tell you just how much I look forward every month to WEIRD TALES, beside which other magazines seem unutterably insipid and uninteresting. The stories in the December issue are all well up to standard. . . . I have followed with interest the cover controversy, which now seems to have eclipsed the 'interplanetary' argument. Personally I would ask, why not have covers in keeping with the theme of the stories—weird and blood-freezing? Think what thrilling, striking covers an imaginative artist could give us by depicting such horrors as are described in *The Horror in the Museum*

(Please turn to page 652)

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(Continued from page 650)

or Lovecraft's or C. A. Smith's fantasies. I trust you will keep this suggestion in view, as the present covers, while highly artistic, can not be described as weird, and it would be interesting to see how such an experiment would be received by the readers. And while on the subject of artists, I must say how delighted I was to see Hugh Rankin return to your pages—his illustration to Frank Owen's story was a gem. Let's have him more often, as his style is peculiarly suited to weird stories."

A Weird Suggestion

Bob Tucker, of Bloomington, Illinois, writes to the Eyrie: "After watching the argument over your sexy covers wax merry, I think it's time for someone to step forward with a suggestion to save the day. So here goes my chance to be a Napoleon. Why not have your nude ladies in very weird or horrifying circumstances, such as the March issue or the issue several months ago that pictured a slim, red-haired girl running with a wolf-pack? To my way of thinking, that picture should please both sides, including your own. It was 'nudy' and it was weird, and it illustrated a scene from one of the stories. If pictures like that were on the covers, it might ease the situation you're in, dear editor. Same thing with the March issue. That ugly black gargoyle in the window serves to dispel the idea that it's a sex magazine. One question, please. Is M. Brundage a man or a woman? No bad feeling now, I am just curious. It seems that everybody in the Eyrie speaks of M. Brundage as a man. I think she's a femme! So what now?" [We shall certainly ask M. Brundage about this.—THE EDITOR.]

He Doesn't Like Vampires

From the West Indies writes G. A. Robinson, of Kingston, Jamaica: "I have been a reader of WT for some years, and up to now I have not joined the writers to the Eyrie, either in praise or blame. I am now starting to join the coterie. . . . For heaven's sake, stop those vampire stories. There have been so many of them and the terrible sameness is their worst point. Same old blood-sucking, garlic, beheading and driven stakes. Stop it, do. . . . Cut out all that kind of stuff. Give us some more of the adventures of Conan in the days of long ago—strong men doing deeds of derring-do—and make them as weird as you like. Now a suggestion—why not get someone to write you a tale like Jack London's *Before Adam*—when the world was young? Plenty of pep and weirdness can be put into it. Fights with the prehistoric animals and among themselves, etc. It can be made into a serial, or be a long complete story each month." [We have already run stories of cave-men from time to time. But the mere fact that the cave-men lived in the dawn period of human life does not make stories about them weird. We expect to run stories of when the world was young, in the future, as we have done in the past; but such stories must be truly weird.—THE EDITOR.]

The Parade of the Nudes

Mrs. Harriet K. Evans, of Rochester, New York, writes: "How anyone can possibly object to the exquisite nudes done by Brundage is beyond me. The first time I ever bought your magazine, I did so because I wanted the picture on the cover (a naked girl running with wolves). The stories were like olives—you had to get used to them before you liked them. But I am writing chiefly to tell you that I hope the nudes will not be discontinued. You see, I have started a procession of these charming unclad ladies, in a decorative scheme on my bathroom wall. I cut out the female figures with a razor blade, and have mounted them one by one, in a sort of nude parade. The result is decidedly pretty, but if you stop printing them now, it is going to be such a short parade. I'd like to have the ladies going all around the room, because I love a parade. So here's to Brundage: may his lovely ladies continue to grace the covers of WEIRD TALES."

Doctor Keller's Serial

Thomas Monning, of Huntington, West Virginia, writes to the Eyrie: "There are very few stories that I really enjoy, but I must certainly hand it to you for the story by David H. Keller that began in the January issue and closed in the March issue of WEIRD TALES, viz.: *The Solitary Hunters.* If you could present a story like that again, or a sequel to it, or give us the hero in a new adventure, I think that your magazine would have no competitor."

Poetry in WT

Frank Bristol, of El Monte, California, writes to the Eyrie: "An excellent feature of WEIRD TALES which so far seems to have failed to gain the plaudits of the readers is the poetry. Some of the poems are equal to many of the efforts of Poe and other famous writers of weird verse. The general tone of WEIRD TALES has suffered a decline from the high standard of quality set during the past summer. Perhaps this is due to the too frequent absence of H. P. Lovecraft and Carl Jacobi from your pages. Reaching a new low level for stories that have appeared in times past and in recent months is *The Solitary Hunters* by David H. Keller."

Demons and Werewolves

Daniel Lee, of San Francisco, writes to the Eyrie: "So seldom that it is not worth mentioning do I find an unpleasing story in your pages. Only the interplanetary stories do I object to, and then only when they are not weird—that is, when they are merely about 'natural' beings of other planets. . . . The more witches, demons, werewolves, and really weird monsters, the merrier. Keep up right behind Conan and Jules de Grandin. They are great."

In Praise of Jules de Grandin

Mabel Hayden, of Cleveland, writes to the Eyrie: "I have read WEIRD TALES for many years and enjoy the poetry as well as the stories. I think Jules de Grandin is the best character of all. He is so very human in his reactions in the most impossible situations that I get many a chuckle out of the egotistic, lovable Frenchman."

Against the Nudes

Joseph H. Heil, of New York, writes: "Why the nudes? I have noticed that the majority of your readers have resented your cheap-looking covers, and I wish to add my emphatic vote against the continuance of these trashy covers. Looking back on the old issues of WT, I find that they contained none of the nudism of your present-day frontispieces, but, notwithstanding, they were much more interesting, and illustrated the stories much more vividly than today. I was first attracted to your publication (several years ago) by an exciting cover depicting some weird plants over-running the earth.

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BACK ISSUES

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Many people are, I am sure, attracted likewise; but how can you expect to attract the attention of a lover of the weird by the portrayal of a wide-eyed nude, gracefully reclining on stones or silks, as the case may be? Why make your readers tear off your covers in order to take the magazine anywhere, outside the privacy of one's own home, and even there one has to be careful not to let it lie around where it might be noticed. Your stories are EXCELLENT! And this month's, *The Black Gargoyle,* by Hugh Cave, was one of your best. Clark Ashton Smith is, I think, one of your best writers; his stories are filled with a realistic atmosphere that completely envelops his readers."

In Defense of Miss Bennett

E. L. Mengshoel writes from Minneapolis: "In my humble opinion, your most fascinating story for a long time was David H. Keller's *The Solitary Hunters,* in spite of its utter impossibility. Mr. Keller has an extremely unusual fantasy and originality. He also seems peculiarly gifted in the way of conjuring up devilish females: remembering his blood-mad tiger-woman in *The Seeds of Death* a couple of years ago, we find this latter specimen in his recent story a most appropriate addition to his 'lovely' anthology. However much I may agree, partly at least, with J. Wasso, Jr., of Pen Argyl, Pennsylvania, about his 'high points' for 1933, I dare his invectives . . . declaring that I second Miss Sylvia Bennett's criticism in the October number of last year. To a great many of us *of mature mind,* there certainly can be too much bloodshed and butchering in adventurous fiction, even when written by such unmistakable literary geniuses as Mr. Howard, of whose ability to give us entertainment of better worth we have had proof enough. . . . To call somebody 'booby' and 'silly' just because he or she has an opinion, or taste, different from one's own, is usually a sign of narrow-mindedness."

She Likes Rankin's Pictures

Irene Pierce, of National City, California, writes to the Eyrie: "There is one thing you can do to make WEIRD TALES *weirder;* that is, have Hugh Rankin illustrate the entire inside as he used to. Just look through a back number of a few years ago and notice the exotic atmosphere, which (I think) has been missing lately. Another thing for this atmosphere: restore the old two-page index with a picture, and the titles far apart. It is well worth the extra space. Why not have reprints only from back numbers that are not available?"

A Bouquet for Mrs. Heald

Bernard J. Kenton, of Cleveland, writes:

My favorite stories in the May WEIRD TALES are:

	Story	Remarks
(1)	----------	----------
(2)	----------	----------
(3)	----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)	----------	Why? ----------
(2)	----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

"How can any discriminating reader find merit in other fantasy magazines when WEIRD TALES adds a new Poe to its columns every month or so? Of the recent writers, Hazel Heald strikes my fancy most, for whenever did anything so strikingly horrible as *The Horror in the Museum* appear in print? Even Lovecraft—as powerful and artistic as he is with macabre suggestiveness—could hardly, I suspect, have surpassed the grotesque scene in which the other-dimensional shambler leaps out upon the hero. *Winged Death* (Heald) makes life a living joy for the amateur criminologist. It is my prediction (verified at least in fiction such as *Winged Death* and *The Solitary Hunters)* that the men of exceptional intellect will turn to crime when legitimate channels of amassing wealth are unnavigable; compared to them, Al Capone will look like a kid stealing milk bottles. C. L. Moore, author of *Shambleau,* looks good to me and if he falls no lower than half the level in *Black Thirst* that was reached in *Shambleau,* I shall be satisfied."

The Nightmare Road

L. J. Dixon, of San Diego, Texas, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for some time and never miss a copy. I want to tell you that I especially enjoyed the short story, *The Nightmare Road,* by Florence Crow, in the March issue. Please let us have some more stories by this author."

Too Bloody

C. E. Baker, of Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, writes: "I have a pile of WT half as high as my piano, and I like most of your authors. But I can't help offering my own protest at such stories as *Murgustrum, The Charnel God,* and others of that sort in which blood-sucking and flesh-eating predominate. Ugh! Give us more stories like *The Sapphire Goddess, The Red Knife of Hassan, Invaders of the Ice World,* etc." [We willingly acknowledge printing Clark Ashton Smith's story, *The Charnel God,* which we thought (and still think) a mighty fine yarn; but *Murgustrum* was in another magazine. It was never printed in WEIRD TALES.—THE EDITOR.]

About Interplanetary Stories

Kent Yarnell, of Berkeley, California, writes: "I notice a never-ending argument among your readers about the interplanetary

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stuff. May I have my say? When I go to the store to buy sugar, I want *sugar,* not salt or spices. If I wanted anything else I would say so. When a man buys your magazine he wants *weird* stories, *not* interplanetary stuff. If he wanted the other, he'd buy one of the magazines specializing in it."

A Word About Reprints

J. J. O'Donnell, of New York City, writes to the Eyrie: "In choosing stories from old issues of WEIRD TALES for your Weird Story Reprint department, why don't you select only those that readers ask for? I notice in the Eyrie during the last year that many readers asked for this, that, or the other story to be reprinted, but you almost never reprint the stories that are asked for. You keep on printing stories that have not been requested by any of your fans who write in. So if you really want to please your readers, why don't you follow their advice in the matter of reprints?" [Many considerations govern us in choosing stories for our reprint department. Some very popular stories in past issues are automatically barred by their very length; that is, though they are not too long to use if they were new stories, readers object to having too much space used for the reprint of old stories. Some of the requests have been for novels; but we have turned thumbs down on this suggestion because you, the readers of WT, have let us know in no uncertain fashion that you do not want us to use our reprint section for serial stories. Every story that we have reprinted from old issues of WEIRD TALES has been specifically requested by the readers, every story thus used having been asked for not only by one reader, but by several. If you have any suggestions as to specific stories that you would like us to reprint from old issues, let us know what these are. Such suggestions will receive our careful consideration, and we will follow them whenever feasible.—THE EDITOR.]

Which Story Is Best?

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write us a letter, or fill in the vote coupon on page 654. The conclusion of Doctor David H. Keller's serial story, *The Solitary Hunters,* was far and away your favorite choice among all the stories in the March issue, to judge from your votes and letters.

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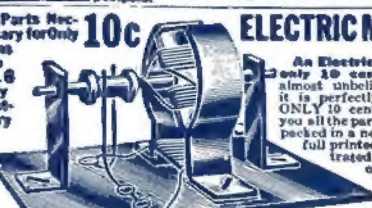

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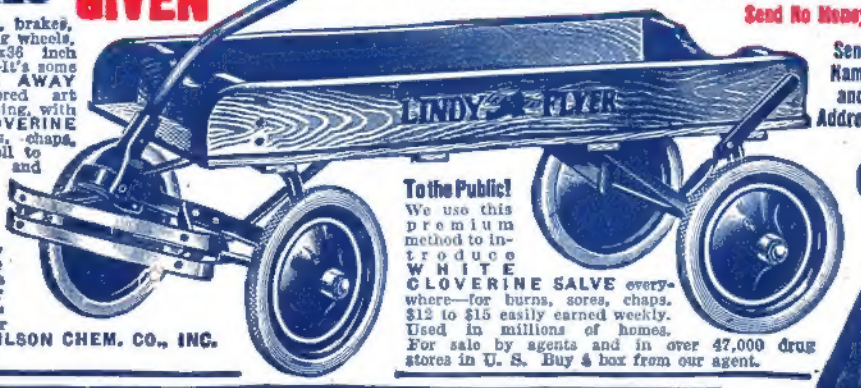

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